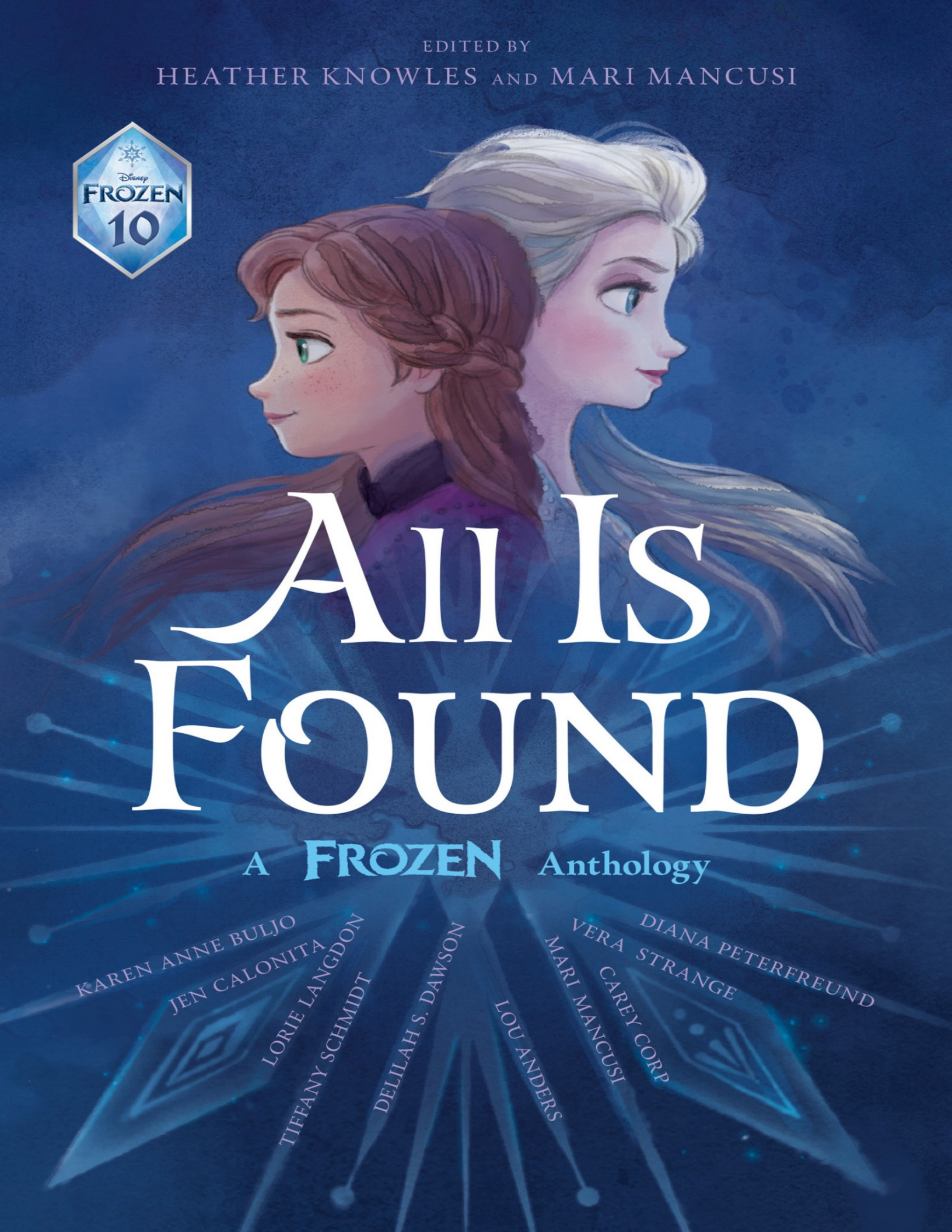


EDITED BY
HEATHER KNOWLES AND MARI MANCUSI

A stylized illustration of Anna and Elsa from Disney's Frozen. Anna is on the left, with her brown hair in a braid, looking towards the right. Elsa is on the right, with her blonde hair flowing, looking towards the left. They are set against a dark blue background with light blue, icy patterns radiating from the center.

ALL IS FOUND

A **FROZEN** Anthology

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JEN CALONITA

LORIE LANGDON

TIFFANY SCHMIDT

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Disney
FROZEN

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Written by

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INTRODUCTION

Dry Banana Hippy Hat!

(Or... Happy Birthday, Frozen!) It's still hard to believe it's been ten years since Queen Elsa fled Arendelle, throwing her crown into the snow and accidentally creating an eternal winter (and bonus ice palace!). I'll never forget watching that scene in theaters for the first time, mesmerized by the music and lyrics as well as the empowering message on the importance of accepting ourselves for who we are, despite whether others will understand. The film was packed with action, adventure, and snowmen, both scary... and silly. And, to top it all off, an unexpected fairy-tale ending where the love of two sisters could thaw a frozen heart.

Frozen fever was real, and we all caught it that winter of 2013. Soon store shelves were as barren of *Frozen* merchandise as Oaken's Trading Post and Sauna was of winter apparel. Families would stand in line over six hours at the theme parks for a chance to meet the two sisters in person. And the music began to feel like a soundtrack to our lives, playing wherever we went—often sung by enthusiastic children dressed as their favorite magical Snow Queen or her feisty younger sister.

No one, it seemed, was able to “let it go.”

And this was just the beginning. Over the years the film spawned several animated shorts and a feature animation sequel that broke box office records. Olaf kept us laughing on Instagram through the depths of the pandemic; and books, comics, and even video games and virtual reality deepened the lore, introducing new characters and entertaining us with side stories set in our favorite Frozen 'verse. And now we have a third feature film to look forward to!

In the meantime, to celebrate the original film's tenth birthday, we've put together a brand-new anthology for you to enjoy. Ten original stories, one for each year, written by ten talented authors (who are also Frozen fans). You'll enjoy sweet, nostalgic, never-before-told stories of Anna's and Elsa's childhoods and brand-new adventures taking place after the events of *Frozen 2*. You'll spend time with beloved side characters (Mattias! Oaken!)

and learn a new Northuldra legend. You'll encounter deadly beasts of Nordic folklore and get to relive Elsa's coronation day—with a rather unexpected time-slippery twist.

Some stories may make you laugh. Others may make you cry. But we hope all of them will remind you of why *Frozen* has remained so close to our hearts for these last ten years. And why it will continue to do so as we journey “into the unknown” for the next decade to come.

With the warmest of hugs, Mari
Mancusi

Author of *Dangerous Secrets: The
Story of Iduna and Agnarr* and *Polar
Nights: Cast Into Darkness*

*Anna of
Arendelle and the
Silver Skates*

By Diana Peterfreund



The first freeze in Arendelle was a beautiful and terrible thing. Princess Elsa could always sense it coming. Her fingers would tingle, and a deep, starving *something* would cry out in her heart.

She couldn't seem to silence it. Something inside her yearned to go out into the frigid air, to cast her magic down into the snow and up into the crisp wintry sky. Those nights, she'd bury her fingers into her covers, trying to hide the cold that would inevitably burst forth, turning her pillows and bedsheets as frosty by morning as the ground outside.

It was proof that she hadn't yet learned to control her magic, as Grand Pabbie had long ago advised. It was proof that she was still unprepared to enter Arendelle society. And the reason that the castle gates remained shut and she remained locked inside.

And then, by midmorning at the latest, would come the worst part of all—the inevitable soft knock on her chamber door.

"Elsa?" Anna's voice, plaintive and filled with an unquenchable hope. It had been years, and yet her little sister never gave up. "Do you want to build a snowman?"

Elsa sat on the richly brocaded chair in her richly furnished chamber, her gloved hands clasped tightly in her lap. Outside, the ice called to her. At the door, her little sister did the same.

"It doesn't have to be a snowman," Anna went on, wheedling. "We could go sledding. Or... skating?"

Elsa winced. In the Before Times, she and Anna had loved to build snowmen, and sled, and even skate. They'd wake up in the middle of the night and sneak down into the Great Hall of the castle. Elsa would use her magic to freeze the floor and send big drifts of snow up against the columns and corners of the room, and they'd have their own winter wonderland.

Anna didn't remember any of that anymore. The troll had seen to that. All she knew was that she and Elsa would play in the ice and snow together.

He should have erased her memories entirely, and maybe Elsa's, too, for good measure. That way, they wouldn't miss each other so much. If only

Elsa could learn to control her powers! Then she could play with her sister again. They could even build snowmen or go ice-skating.

“Elsa?” Anna tried again, always hopeful.

Elsa bit her lip. Inside her gloves, the frost spread.

“Okay,” her sister said at last, her voice filled with a sadness as deep as the fjord. “Bye.”

Long after she was gone, Elsa remained glued to her seat, worried that she’d lose her nerve and open the door.



It was a good thing that Arendelle Castle’s grounds were so expansive, or Princess Anna might have gotten bored years ago. As it was, she felt like she’d memorized every brick in the walls and each tree in the royal gardens. In the spring, she’d given names to every fluffy yellow duckling that hatched in the royal duck pond, and in the autumn, she’d watched tearfully as each duck, now grown and wearing its green-and-black plumage, flew south for the winter, on adventures Anna herself could barely imagine.

One day, perhaps she too would venture beyond these confining walls.

Now that very same duck pond was frozen solid, though, and Anna had plans.

Even if her sister once again had no interest in playing with her, it didn’t mean Anna herself had to be stuck inside all winter. She pulled on her warmest fur-lined cape and her thickest stockings and boots.

Once upon a time—Anna remembered it well—she and Elsa had run all over the castle grounds in the winter, building snowmen in the gardens, sledding off the hills near the courtyard, and, yes, skating on this duck pond. It had been years since Anna had skated, but it couldn’t be that hard to pick up again, right?

Earlier she’d heard two kitchen maids whispering about a festival the village was holding this weekend in celebration of the first frost. There would be food and games and fun, and it sounded like a total fantasy. Ice-sculpting contests and ice-skating races, a winter market and a hot chocolate stand...

Outside the castle it seemed like everyone was always having fun. She had no idea why her parents never let her go.

She also had no idea where her old skates were hidden. She doubted the ones she'd had when she was little would fit anymore, but Elsa's probably would, and Elsa obviously wasn't using them. Anna searched high and low to no avail. It was very strange. She knew they'd often gone skating.

But Anna had never been one to let a little adversity stop her. She grabbed a bit of twine and some smooth lengths of cloth to tie over her boots and tromped out into the snow.

The air was cold and clear, and some castle servant had helpfully shoveled the walk down to the duck pond. The ice over the surface was frosty but clear, and it seemed thick enough to hold her weight, especially if she stayed near the edges of the pond. Fortunately, the servants had also swept the frozen pond clean of snow that might have blown or fallen on the ice, keeping the surface as flat as glass. She sat down on a rock and began to tie the cloth over her shoes. It would have been so much better if she'd had real skates. It would have been so much better if she'd had a lot of things. She cast one last look back at the castle wall, where, far up, she could see the tall windows that belonged to her sister's chamber.

For a second, she thought she saw a shadow in the window.

"Elsa!" she called, and waved furiously.

But if that really was her sister, the shadow didn't wave back. Typical.

Anna tied the final knot. She was so tired of waiting. She wanted to skate, even if Elsa didn't. She nodded firmly, pushed her red braids behind her shoulders, and took a step out onto the ice.



Elsa watched from the window of her chamber, just like always. Far below, Anna was trying—and failing—to skate on the duck pond.

Elsa supposed it couldn't properly be called skating, not really. What her little sister was doing was sliding around on a bit of cloth or something tied to her boots. Actually, what she was mostly doing was slipping a few feet on the ice, then falling. Honestly, it seemed painful, and it had been going on for over half an hour. Elsa imagined Anna's entire backside was covered in bruises at this point, and she was probably freezing.

Any minute, her sister would give up.

Any minute.

Another half hour went by. *Slip, slip, thunk. Slip, slip, whoosh. Slip, slip, bonk.*

Elsa groaned. Frost crept up the glass from the ends of her frustrated fingers. She wished she could help. She knew how. Despite years of focusing solely on *not* using her magic, she still remembered exactly what it was like to make smooth sheets of ice, to make shapes from snow. She could magic up a set of icy blades for the bottom of her sister's boots that would make this entire process so much easier.

She could... but she wouldn't.

She'd promised to keep her magic secret from her sister. To control it, to not let it show.

Outside, on the ice, Anna kept trying.

Slip, slip... crash.

Elsa straightened and pressed her hands against the windowpane. The air in the room dropped twenty degrees. Down by the duck pond, all she could see of her sister was two stockinged legs waving in the air from deep in a snowbank, under a weeping willow.

Frantically, Elsa checked the area around the pond, but she saw no servants, no stable hands. No one to help her sister.

No one... but her.

Elsa couldn't take it anymore. She went over to her closet, pushing aside the fancy fur coats she never wore, the warm velvet cloaks she found stifling both inside and outdoors.

Far in the back was a trunk. It had once been her mother's, back when Queen Iduna was nothing more than a common girl in love with a king. Inside were plenty of plain, simple clothes. Anna probably didn't remember it now, but the girls had used to play dress-up with them.

In the old days. When they'd played.

Elsa dug through the stack of rough-knit sweaters and thick boiled-wool caps. From the very bottom, she pulled out a pair of skates.

They were fancier than most of the stuff in her mother's trunk, with sharp silver blades. A gift, the queen had said, from someone who should have known better at the time.

And then she'd always smiled that goofy grin at their father. The one that made the girls blush and groan.

Elsa hadn't ever used the skates, and neither had Anna. Why bother, when she could have just magicked up a set of ice blades and gone

careening around the ballroom?

But that was then. And this? This was now.

There was just one problem. She could never let Anna know.



Anna dug her body out of the snowdrift, feeling something very akin to despair. This was impossible!

Around her, the wind blew cold and harsh. Her skin stung where her clothes were soaked through. She could hardly even feel her fingers anymore. All this time, all this work, and she'd barely even made it a few feet across the ice.

How had it been so much easier when she was a child? So much easier... with Elsa?

Out of nowhere, something cold and soft and wet smacked her right in the back of her head. A snowball!

Stunned, Anna whirled around, her hand going by instinct to her head. Bits of fresh snow encrusted her braids. Someone had thrown a snowball at her!

But there was no one lurking by the trunk of the willow tree, or hiding behind its drooping branches. In fact, all she saw was a glint of...

Wait, what was that? Anna's eyes narrowed as she peered more closely.

There, resting in a tangle of willow branches Anna could have sworn had not existed a second ago, was a pair of ice skates. Bright white ice skates, with silver blades.

She squealed with delight and went closer.

To the touch, the skates were ice cold, which was probably not surprising given they were out in this freezing weather. She pulled them down from the branches, still looking to see where they could have come from.

But there was no one around. There was never anyone around. And the skates were here, in her castle courtyard. Could they be meant for her?

"Hello?" she asked the winter wind. "Anyone there?"

There was no answer.

In fairy tales, princesses had fairy godmothers. Maybe that was what this was.

Or a troll. Could always be a troll, right?

Before she could talk herself out of it, Anna untied the cloths from her shoes, pulled off her boots, and slipped her feet inside the skates. They fit perfectly.

The blades cut firmly but minutely into the ice at her feet as she took her first steps out onto the duck pond. She wasn't slipping! She felt... powerful.

She pushed off, arms held out for balance, expecting at any moment for her feet to slide out from beneath her as they had so many times before.

But they didn't! The skates slid through the ice with a satisfying *schewp-schewp* sound.

That was the problem! That was it the whole time. She hadn't forgotten how to skate. She just needed real skates. Beautiful ones, like these.

She circled the pond, tentatively at first, and then—as she got the feel for the blades, for the ice, for the wind on her face—with far more confidence.

Schewp schewp schewp.

Anna grinned from ear to ear. Could she go faster?

Oh, yes, she could.



Elsa slammed the door to her bedroom behind her, panting. That was close! She was sure that Anna might have seen her, lurking beyond the willow.

She felt hot all over, her face flushed, probably from running through the castle and sprinting across the grounds.

It had been years since she'd thrown a snowball. She was afraid she'd forgotten how. But even without the magic, the snow obeyed her perfectly, smacking her sister right in the back of the head.

Elsa hoped it had worked.

Tentatively, she approached the window, her gloved hands covering her face. Somehow, Elsa felt as if peeking through her gloved fingers made it just the tiniest bit better. She wasn't supposed to go near Anna until she learned how to control her magic. She certainly shouldn't have played in the snow. But she'd done it, for her sister.

Elsa looked.

Down on the duck pond, Anna skated around on their mother's old ice skates. She shouted for joy, her red braids flying out behind her like a streak

as she went faster and faster with every loop.
And Elsa had done that, too.



The next time Anna approached Elsa's door, she was hopeful in a way she hadn't been in a long time. She knocked, as usual, and waited to see if her sister would open the door.

Of course, she did not.

"Want to go skating?" she asked the door's painted panels. "Come on, Elsa, the weather is perfect. Remember how much we used to like skating together? The duck pond isn't far..."

No answer.

She took a breath.

"Okay," she continued, her voice a bit lower. "But listen, I have a secret. I found these skates, out by the pond. I've been skating on them every day. They're amazing, Elsa. So smooth, so fast, so beautiful. And skating on them—wow, it's just like magic!"

Was that a noise? Had Elsa made some kind of sound there on the other side of the door?

Anna pressed her forehead against the door. It was cool to the touch—no, cold, even. How very strange.

"Elsa," she wheedled. "Please? Please at least come *watch* me skate? You won't believe how fast I am! I've only been practicing a few days...."

Sometimes, Anna wondered if Elsa was really in there at all. They saw each other at formal events, of course, nodded to one another across a lavish dinner table or from a castle balcony. Her sister was so tall and elegant now, so distant. So silent.

It was hard to remember that they'd ever played together at all.

The door was so cold! Did Elsa have the window open in there? She must have been freezing.

If only her sister would answer. Even talking would be better than this cold, quiet closed door.

Then Anna had an idea. A delightful idea. A wicked idea.

"Want to hear a secret?" she blurted out. "Want to hear my plan? It's crazy, really. But these skates are so great, and I'm skating so fast, and

really, it's a shame that I never get to try them out on anything but the old duck pond...."

Was that a sound behind the door? Was Elsa even listening?

"Anyway, I heard there's a festival down in the village square today. A winter festival with games and contests... and a skating race—and I'm going to enter it!" Anna finished triumphantly.

Was that a gasp? Was her sister going to say something at last?

Anna didn't care. The moment the words passed her lips she realized that she was actually going to do it. Not just say so to tease Elsa to get her to open this door. Actually go.

"Mama and Papa would be so upset... but they wouldn't stop me," she insisted. Her brow furrowed, her jaw clenched. "And neither will you—will you, Elsa? You won't tell me not to do it. You won't even open. This. Door."

She put her hand up to touch the knob, then pulled it back. The metal was so cold it almost burned.

"Elsa?" she said again, forgetting for a moment her years of frustration. Her sister was sitting in there, all alone and apparently freezing. Anna had no idea what she did for fun anymore. Certainly nothing like Anna was about to do. "Are you all right in there?"

But, as always, there was no answer.



It was official: Elsa had created a monster.

Every protective older-sister instinct she'd ever had warred with her resolve. She was moments from flinging open the door and telling Anna under no circumstances was she to go down to the village alone.

But surely Anna would only use that as an excuse to ask Elsa to come along. Which she couldn't do. Ever.

No matter how much she might want to.

When she was sure the coast was clear, Elsa cracked open the door to her room. The hallway was empty, as usual. The castle's skeleton staff must be working in some other wing today.

She crept down the hall to her sister's chambers. Anna—possibly in protest—hardly ever closed her door completely. From inside, Elsa could hear her grumbling.

“The problem with being a princess,” Anna complained to no one in particular, “is that all of your clothes *look* like you’re a princess. Ugh! I have nothing to *wear*!”

Elsa peered through the crack between the door and the threshold. If Anna looked out, Elsa could pretend she was just walking down the hall for something else. After all, it was a free hall.

Her jaw dropped as she glanced in the room. Elsa’s little sister had created an enormous mess. Piles of gowns lay all over the bed and the floor. The maids would have a fit when they saw it.

“What am I supposed to skate in!” Anna groaned, and flopped onto the bed.

For a moment all was silent. Elsa bit her lip and listened harder.

Was that—was that crying?

Protective older-sister instincts reared up again, but this time, there was a very different goal in mind.

Elsa hurried back down the hall to her own room. To Iduna’s trunk.

A cap to hide those wild red braids. A thick sweater to keep her warm. Peasant-boy pants—the kind made to move in. These weren’t just dress-up clothes in her mother’s old trunk. They were perfect for skating.

But how to get them to her sister without giving it all away? Elsa bundled the clothes in her arms and headed back toward Anna’s room.

There she saw her sister waist deep in her royal closet, rejecting every item in her wardrobe as being far too fancy for the festival.

Talk about princess problems. Elsa shook her head.

Then, before her sister could turn around, she raised the bundle of clothes in her arms and lobbed them into the middle of the biggest pile of rejects.

There was a loud *woompf* as the clothing pile toppled over.

Elsa didn’t look to see if Anna noticed. She just ran.



Anna was ready to give up entirely. No way could she sneak into the village dressed like Princess Anna of Arendelle. Her skirts were all embroidered with the royal crest, her vests all had golden buttons up the front.

She sat back in a pile of ball gowns and sighed. Just then, her eye caught on something unfamiliar. Unfamiliar and very brown.

She cocked her head at the trousers now lying among the piles of silk and satin. Where had those come from? They were dark and rough, like somehow the gardener's laundry had gotten mixed up with her own. And nearby lay a sweater she didn't recognize in a drab olive green, and a boiled-wool cap in dishwater gray.

Had those things been in her closet? A costume? A mistake?

No! She sat up straight. It was another gift from that invisible fairy godmother, that magical troll who'd left her the skates!

Anna got dressed in the new clothes at once. They were a bit big on her, but they'd do the job. She dug up her thickest pair of mittens and the warmest socks as well, then stuffed her red braids inside the cap and admired her reflection in the mirror.

There. Now she looked just like any random village boy.

She was doing this. She was really sneaking out!

It was easier than she'd expected to sneak through the empty halls of the castle in her getup and out the door. Easy to grab her skates from their hiding place by the old willow and creep along the wall until she found a drift of snow firm and high enough to scabble up the side, and another, far more obligingly soft drift to hop into on the other.

She took one look back at the castle, at its high towers and cold, empty leaded glass windows. It was impossible to see from here if anyone had watched her escape. If anyone even cared.

Well, *she* didn't care, either. She was sick of waiting around inside. She was going to have an adventure if it was the last thing she ever did.

Nodding firmly, she straightened her cap, adjusted her scarf over her face, and set off down toward the town square.



Once Anna had clambered over the castle wall, Elsa could no longer see her from her window. But still she didn't leave, remaining seated by the glass and staring out, as if wishing she could watch what was happening in the village would somehow make it so.

If she closed her eyes, she could almost feel it—the freezing wind nipping at Anna's face, turning her cheeks red and her eyes bright, swirling around the streets down to the village—

“Elsa!”

Elsa's eyes popped open and she whirled around to see her mother, Queen Iduna, standing at the door. And then she saw the rest of it.

The frost over the windowpane, the icicles dangling in crystal majesty from the curtains.

Elsa tightened her hands into fists in horror.

"Oh, Mother, I'm sorry. I had no idea! I—I wasn't paying attention."

"Sweetheart..." The queen came closer, but Elsa shied away. She didn't want to hurt her.

It was always like this. She'd spent so many years trying desperately to control her magic, to not feel, and yet it felt so much more powerful than any mastery she'd managed to achieve over it in all this time. Using it was easy—not using it was what was hard.

Just like every other part of her life. Loving her sister was so much easier than avoiding Anna for her own safety.

But, as Elsa's father said, just because a thing was hard did not mean it wasn't worth doing. Ruling Arendelle was no picnic, and as heir, Elsa needed to learn everything there was about doing that, too.

"Oh, Elsa," her mother said. "And here I thought things had been going so well lately."

They had been. At least, they had until Elsa had started letting her guard down. Helping Anna with this skating quest. Playing with snowballs.

She hung her head in shame. Elsa could not afford to slip up.

"I know it's hard in the wintertime," Iduna said gently. "It's so very, very beautiful." She came to stand beside Elsa anyway. "Is that my old trunk? What do you have that out for?"

"Nothing," Elsa said quickly, making a decision. No more risks. "It was silly."

And it was over.



Anna had always loved going into town the few times she'd accompanied her parents on visits. Even through the windows of some stuffy carriage, the village of Arendelle had been filled with wondrous sights and sounds and smells. The seafood market with its pungent odors and sharp cries of fishmongers hawking their wares. The ice sellers with their massive sleds and their majestic reindeer. Her mother, Iduna, would sometimes point out

the windmills on the hills beyond the fjord and explain how, long ago, she was apprenticed to an inventor who built such amazing machines.

Anna would always beg to visit the windmills, but it never seemed to be the right time, at least according to her parents.

Today she had better things to do as well. She slipped in with the crowds and followed the decorations through the winding streets of the market to where the winter festival was already under way. The smells of roasting meat and spiced cider filled the air, and Anna was pleased she'd remembered to stuff a handful of coins in her pocket before she'd taken off.

She was looking at the golden, flaky pastries piled high in a cart when she noticed two other children also enjoying the scent of baked goods and chocolate. It was a small girl and a tall boy, about the same ages as herself and Elsa, dressed simply but warmly. Both had battered brown skates slung across their shoulders and worn blue caps on their heads.

All at once, the girl noticed Anna staring at them. "Hello," she said, and nudged the boy. "Look, Trygve. Our competition."

The boy eyed her up and down. "Seems so. Look at those fancy skates!"

"Uh, hi," Anna said shyly. "Are you in line for pastries?"

"No," said the girl bluntly. "We're saving our money to enter the skating race."

"Me too!" Anna blurted, even though she hadn't had any idea there was an entry fee at all, let alone how much it was. "Do you know where to go?"

"Of course," said the girl. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Oh no, was it that obvious? "I'm visiting," she said quickly. She racked her brain for the names of her father's trading partners. "From, uh... Weselton. We don't have skating races there. We have, um... weasel races...."

"Weird," said the girl, possibly tired of Anna's blathering. "I'm Nora. This is my brother, Trygve."

"I'm Ann—" Oh no, she really should have thought of a name. A boy's name. "Anders. Anders Anderson. That's me." Was this what it was like, making friends? She liked it. A lot.

"Nice skates, Anders," said Trygve, though his arms were still crossed.



Anna was glad to have some companions as they made their way to the racing area. They wandered past stalls selling embroidered shawls and some with painted sleds. A man in a cart was selling reindeer bridles studded with golden, jingling bells. Nora chattered about the race and about their cottage on the slopes near the fjord. Their parents worked in the mill, and they kept their own sheep.

Anna was amazed by the stories. “What are they like?” she asked. “The sheep?”

“Smelly,” answered Trygve.

The race itself began at a canal that ran up a street at the edge of the market, all the way to the mill. Trygve and Nora walked with Anna. They signed in together at a little booth where Anna discovered that the money she had brought would have covered not only the entrance fee for all three of them, but pastries for half the crowd as well.

“I guess I don’t know the exchange rate,” she said sheepishly, but her new friends seemed skeptical. No matter what country’s currency it was, she’d accidentally brought a fortune to the race.

Still, all that faded away once they strapped on their skates and hit the ice to warm up. Anna thrilled at the wind in her face as she circled the little practice area with the other skaters. The silver skates on her feet were just as smooth here as they’d been on the duck pond. She glided and skimmed over the ice, taking in the gaily painted banners and flags that spectators were waving around the paths above the canal.

How much you missed by staying inside the castle gates!

Around her, the competition was skating, too. There was a girl in a graceful purple gown who seemed as interested in leaps and spins as she was in speed. A trio of young men in the furs and leathers of the ice cutters from the North Mountain raced past, their moves in perfect unison. A cluster of kids younger than Anna were falling all over themselves and one another every few strokes of their skates.

Trygve was steady and focused as a skater. Each stroke was precise, moving him efficiently across the ice. Nora was more playful, scissoring her feet in and out and squatting to glide beneath the struts sticking out of the canal wall.

“Wow,” said Anna.

Trygve skated up beside her and slowed to match her pace. “Don’t be fooled by her size. Nora’s going to give all of us a challenge.”

“It must be nice,” she said, “skating with your sister. My sister never comes out with me.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he replied. “Does she only like playing with other girls?”

“What?” Anna said, and then caught herself. That was right, she was supposed to be a boy. “Oh, yeah. That’s it. Actually, she never even comes out of her room.”

By now Nora had circled the starting area and come up behind them. “What? When there’s this whole winter wonderland out here?” She spread her arms and spun around on the ice.

Anna laughed. “I don’t know. I guess she doesn’t like the cold very much.”

On her feet the silver skates gleamed. She sped across the ice, more than ready to race.



Elsa tamped down her fear as her mother stood by her side at the window. There was no way that the queen could know that even now, her younger daughter had snuck out of the castle and was walking down to the village.

“I love this time of year,” Iduna said, gazing out at the frost.

Elsa did not say that it was her favorite, too. But she was sure her mother knew anyway.

“There’s a winter festival down in the village today,” her mother went on. “I was planning on making a brief appearance.”

“Wait... what?” Elsa started. She had not considered that. Though no one in the village had seen either of the princesses in years, her mother would not be fooled by Anna’s disguise. Especially since they were her old clothes.

Iduna placed a hand comfortingly on Elsa’s shoulder. “Perhaps you would like to come with me?”

No, because she could not control her magic. She could not leave her room. She could not act like Arendelle’s crown princess and make appearances at festivals, because she might accidentally ice the whole parade.

“But—but—” She gestured helplessly with her gloved hands.

Her mother waved that off. “You’re just getting what we used to call cabin fever. Castle fever, in this case. I would be willing to bet that getting outside in a real winter wonderland for a few hours will keep you from bringing one indoors.” She smiled, as if she was telling a little joke.

Elsa did not find it funny.

“You don’t even have to get out of the carriage, if you’re not comfortable,” her mother went on. “No one will know you are there. You can just look through the windows. We won’t bring Anna. It’ll be just you and me.”

Elsa caught her breath. Perhaps this would be best. She could keep her mother from wondering where Anna was in the castle all afternoon, and then, down at the festival, she might steer the queen away from the skating race.

Though it would be a thrill to see her sister in action.

Her mother looked at her for a long, long time. Long enough for ice crystals to blossom under every fingertip inside her gloves.

“I suppose so,” said Elsa at last. “As long as no one sees me.”

Her mother leaned in her head to touch her daughter’s, a secret smile on her face. “No one will ever know. It’s like we’re in disguise.”

Elsa closed her eyes. If she only knew!



Soon enough, all the skaters—including Anna—gathered at the starting area of the ice. The race official, a large man with a red beard, spelled out the rules.

“The race will begin at my mark. The course consists of three loops around the canal. Start here and skate counterclockwise, all the way down to the flags at the far end. All skaters must pass the flags three times on their left-hand side or they will be disqualified. There are prizes for the first three skaters to complete the race.”

Anna adjusted her hat down over her braids and got into starting position. Nearby, her new friends Trygve and Nora were jockeying for position at the front of the pack. People crowded the paths above the canal, leaning on the railings and looking out below to cheer on their friends in the race.

She wished her own family could be there to see her.

Just then a whistle blew, and the race began. The scrape of blades on ice filled the air, and racers began to jostle and move around her. Anna quickly realized that this was nothing like the duck pond. There, she had all the space in the world to move precisely as she wanted to, but here, she dodged elbows and feet, nowhere near able to set the pace she wanted as she fought for any space at all on the crowded ice.

A skater went down in front of her and she swerved wildly to miss running over their fingers. Unfortunately, the move sent her in the path of the ice cutters, who had formed a solid wall across the course.

Anna's arms wheeled wildly in the air.

"Watch out!" one of the ice cutters barked at her. As one, they swerved to miss her. She overcorrected her stride and caught the edge of her left blade on an imperfection in the ice, tripping and spinning off course in an attempt to keep from wiping out.

The crowd gasped.

After a moment, Anna managed to regain control of herself. She patted the hat on her head, making sure it was still secure, and got her bearings. The racers had all moved on. She was dead last!

"Come on, skates!" she called between gritted teeth and started after the others.

The silver skates did not fail her. Cleared of those who were blocking her before, Anna was able to pick up speed easily. By the time the first skaters were passing the flags at the far end of the course, she had reached the back of the pack. The others had spread out some at this point, and she was able to pass the flailing children as she might have avoided a boulder in the duck pond or a fallen willow branch.

Looking ahead, Anna spotted the girl in the purple gown. She had given up on her twirls and was now trying to focus on speed, but her form was all off. Anna raced by her.

By the time the leaders had completed the first loop, Anna had managed to catch up to the three ice cutters, who were still skating in perfect unison, blocking the course for anyone who might want to pass.

The three came closer and closer to the starting gate, where another flagpole marked their turn. Anna did not think she could pass them on the outside, but she could also tell by their moves that the leftmost skater was sure to cut as close to the pole as possible as they turned.

She skated behind them, unsure, as they all turned together. Anna knew she had the speed to pass them, but they wouldn't let her through. She dithered, skating up on one side, then another, the entire length of the canal. She was still stuck behind them as they made their second turn around the flags at the far end of the course. She'd never get past them at this rate!

Anna glanced across the course to where she could see Nora in the lead, the pom-pom on her blue hat bobbing with every stroke. She was already so far ahead she was circling around behind the slowest racers.

Remembering Nora's antics during practice, Anna got an idea. She skated close to the three ice cutters, set her silver skates one before the other in a straight line, then swiftly got down low, holding her hands out for balance, and zipped underneath the ice cutters' arms.

The crowd went wild.

Anna smiled and straightened, and didn't notice for half a length that her hat had been knocked clean off her head.



"Well!" cried Queen Iduna from her carriage seat. She had been peering out the window down at the skating race in the canal below, but now sat back in her seat, an expression very much like shock across her features. "I don't know what to say."

Elsa clasped her gloved hands in her lap, and a chill wind seemed to blow about the carriage walls.

"Elsa, darling, do look out the window and tell me if I'm seeing things."

Obediently, Elsa looked. It did not take long to catch sight of her sister, her auburn braids streaming behind her, flying around the racecourse in her commoner's clothes.

"I..." She didn't know what to say.

"I had no idea your sister could skate like that. Did you?"

Miserably, she nodded. "I've, um, been watching her. On the duck pond."

"The duck pond?" The queen shook her head in disbelief. "My goodness."

"Wait," Elsa said. "You're not mad?"

Her mother chuckled. "Well, sneaking around the castle isn't what I'd want my children to do. But I'm forced to admit you aren't the only

Arendellian royal children to have done it. I do wish she had asked me, though.”

A cheer went up from the crowd. The race was over.

“Is Anna in trouble?”

Her mother looked sad. “We’re all in a bit of trouble, I think. Anna for sneaking around, and your father and I for making her think she had to sneak.”

And Elsa, too. Elsa always, for her uncontrollable magic that was making the rest of it so very necessary.

“I left her the skates, you know,” she confessed. “They’re from your old trunk.”

Her mother nodded. “I see. Well, I suppose we’ll have to have a talk with her when she gets back. But for now, let her have her fun.”

She notified the driver of the carriage that they wanted to return to the castle.

Elsa took one final look out the window at the festival. Down on the ice, she saw the winner of the skating race—a young girl in a blue hat—but no sign of her own sister.



Knock knock!

“Elsa?” Anna’s voice echoed down the hall. “Please, I know you’re in there. Don’t you want to hear about my day?”

No answer, as usual. But Anna was too excited to care. She started telling Elsa’s door the entire story. The shepherd children she’d met, the trick she’d learned to pass the racers who were blocking her, the loss of her hat. She told her sister all about it.

“Oh, Elsa, it was amazing. I wish you could have seen it.” It would have been like the old days, when the two of them had run all over the castle without a care in the world. Like Trygve and Nora did, up the fjord on their little sheep farm. Like siblings were *supposed* to.

“Anyway...” Anna went on. “I... um... I brought you something. From the festival.”

She put her skates down by the door and, from her pocket, drew out a little packet wrapped in brown paper. Delicious smells wafted up from the contents.

“It’s a little squashed now,” she admitted. “But... oh, Elsa, won’t you please open the door?”

And there was still no answer. None at all. Anna bit her lip, and her eyes stung with unshed tears. Just for once, she wanted her sister to play with her. Just for once, she wanted them to be happy together, like sisters.

“It’s chocolate,” she said weakly.

Nothing. All at once, her anger flared. Maybe Elsa didn’t care.

Down below, in the Great Hall, the doors to the castle opened. From far away, the voice of a royal guard called, “Her Majesty, Queen Iduna.”

Anna startled. Oh no, her mother couldn’t see her like this! She dashed back down the hall to her room—forgetting entirely that her skates and the pastry were still on the floor by the door.



The first thing Elsa saw when she returned to her room was the pair of skates and the crumpled pastry lying outside her door.

Her mother pursed her lips. “It’s possible your sister understands what happened far more than you are giving her credit for.”

“Chocolate,” Elsa said wistfully, picking up the items. Anna had even remembered that it was her favorite.

Nevertheless, a crown princess of Arendelle could hardly eat floor pastry. She opened the door to her bedroom and dropped the pastry into the waste bin. Such a disappointment. Like so many other things.

Her mother followed her inside, holding the skates. “Oh, what to do,” she said, shaking her head ruefully.

“Mother,” Elsa said. “Don’t punish Anna. I feel responsible. If I’d never given her the skates—”

“Acting like a queen already?” Iduna replied. “You remind me so much of your father. You are not responsible for every choice another person makes, whether it’s your subject or your sister. Anna chose to sneak into the village. That was not your idea.”

“But she never would have had to if...” Elsa trailed off and clasped her gloved hands behind her back. They all knew why.

Her mother got that patient, sad look on her face again. The one Elsa felt like the cold in her bones.

“Perhaps our rules have been a little too harsh,” her mother said. “Neither of you girls should be spending so much time alone.”

It was true. Elsa could not stop smiling at the memory of her sister racing around that canal on the silver skates. The sight was the most delightful thing she’d seen in—well—years. It warmed her heart like spring. She had done that. She had brought that joy to her sister’s life. It was like the old days, when she and Anna would run all over the castle, delighting in her magic without a care in the world. She wished it could always be this way.

She wished she would learn to master her magic. Then she and Anna could always be together.

Her mother seemed to understand that, too. She reached her hand out and cupped Elsa’s cheek. “I’ll talk to your father and find a way,” she promised Elsa. “Soon.”

Iduna turned to go, and as she opened the door to Elsa’s bedroom she saw Anna lurking in the hall.

Elsa peeked out around her mother’s form. Anna’s braids were still a mess. Her gown was buttoned all wrong.

“Mother! You’re home!” Anna exclaimed in a tone that wouldn’t have fooled a particularly dim reindeer. “I’ve been alone in my room all day. Reading.”

“Oh, really,” her mother said. “I’m just back from the winter festival. There was an exhilarating skating race.” She gave one last knowing glance back at Elsa. Elsa wanted to sink into the floorboards. She felt the temperature drop around her.

But across the threshold she met Anna’s eyes, brilliant green, defiant.

If there was one thing to know about Anna, it was that she never gave up. “I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Anna said. “You know I can’t skate.”

Engaging
Anna
and Kristoff

By Jen Calonita



*Please join us for a
ROYAL ENGAGEMENT PARTY*
honoring
Queen Anna of Arendelle & Kristoff Bjorgman of Troll Valley
Given, with Love,
by Queen Elsa and Olaf & Bulda and Cliff
This Saturday at Sunset
the Arendelle Castle Courtyard
Psst... it's a surprise! Don't tell Anna and Kristoff!*

**Throwing a party? Hire Oaken's Hearty Party-Planning Service... and Sauna—we're here for all your party-planning (and sauna) needs!*

FOUR HOURS BEFORE THE PARTY

"I can't believe you're here!" Anna yelled to Elsa, rushing down the castle hallway. She held her tiara with one hand and her skirt with the other, revealing the sensible boots she was wearing underneath a green-and-cream silk ball gown. "This is such a nice surprise."

"That's me—full of surprises," Elsa said softly, maintaining a small smile—one that she hoped didn't appear too excited yet didn't make it seem like she wasn't happy to see her sister, either. Her fingers tingled.

"I thought you weren't coming till the Yule Bell celebration next week," Anna cheered, running faster to meet her.

"I thought we could start the holiday celebrations early," Elsa said simply.

"Early sounds good to me!" Anna ran at Elsa full force, practically knocking her over with the weight of her hug.

Elsa and Anna agreed: Arendelle was never more beautiful than it was during the holidays. The ceremonial ringing of the Yule Bell kicked off the festivities that included everything from families putting out the porridge for the tomte and rolling lefse for their parties to knitting socks for presents.

A highlight was always the Polar Nights Festival, which seemed to get bigger every year.

But this year the kingdom had another reason to celebrate—Anna and Kristoff’s engagement. Elsa knew that, after so many years of closed gates and lonely milestones, Anna would love a party. Kristoff maybe not so much, but he’d survive. He’d do anything for her sister. And so Elsa had decided to throw a surprise party, inviting Bulda and the rest of the trolls to help her. The details had been coming together beautifully.

The only issue? Keeping the happy couple from finding out.

Elsa had an idea on how to keep Kristoff in the dark, but Anna was the tricky one. Her sister—how did she put it delicately?—could be a bit curious? Intuitive? Nosy?

“You said you had too much work this week to get back to the castle early to help us decorate,” Anna said, squeezing Elsa tight. “Those were your exact words.”

In a nearby open doorway, Elsa saw a distinct shadow—one that consisted of an oval-shaped snowball head and a blocky snowball body—watching them.

“I got done early,” Elsa murmured into Anna’s hair, which smelled like chocolate and pine needles and reminded her of home. “I couldn’t miss hanging ornaments on all the trees.”

Anna pulled away, still beaming. “I told everyone to leave the big tree in our parlor bare so we could decorate it together with Kristoff, Sven, and Olaf.” She bit her lip. “The rest of the castle is decorated, though. If I had known you were coming, I would have waited.”

Elsa had been hoping decorations would be up. She looked around the hallway: boughs of garland were draped over windows, and wreaths hung on every door. Elsa knew when she walked through each room, including her own bedroom, she’d find a tree decorated with handmade ornaments, some of which she and Anna had made as small children before... well, she didn’t like to think about “after” that much. The present was much happier, and she was determined to pull out all the stops to celebrate this new chapter in her sister’s life. She knew Bulda, who adored “her boy” Kristoff, felt the same way.

“It looks beautiful, which is good, because... well...” Elsa hesitated.

Anna picked up on her tone right away, firing off a slew of thoughts all at once. “I knew you had a reason for being here early! What’s going on?”

You can talk to me about anything, you know.”

Elsa looked around before leaning in close. “I’m here because the trolls have a surprise for Kristoff and need our help pulling it off.”

Anna squeezed Elsa’s hand, making the tingling sensation stop. “A surprise for Kristoff? What is it? How do you know about this? Why don’t I know about this? Tell me everything! How can I help?”

Elsa spoke in a conspiratorial tone. “I stopped in to see the trolls in the Valley of the Living Rock the other day, and Bulda and Cliff told me today is the tenth anniversary of Kristoff starting his official ice harvesting business.”

Anna gasped. “Kristoff didn’t tell me that. Neither did Sven! I mean, it makes sense—I know Kristoff started delivering ice in his teens, but I had no idea he had a big anniversary coming up.” She frowned. “Now I feel terrible. I must be the worst fiancée ever.”

This was taking a turn Elsa had not prepared for. “Not true! You’re the best fiancée! You know how Kristoff is. He’d never brag about himself like that.” She thought for a moment. “Although Sven might.”

“Sven would,” Anna agreed. “We have to do something.”

“I knew you’d say that, which is why I told Bulda and the trolls you’d throw a small party here. At the castle. Tonight.” Anna looked panicked, as Elsa knew she would. “But not to worry. I’ve taken care of all the details already. All you need to do is keep Kristoff busy this afternoon so we can set up. You can bring him back around sunset.”

“I can do that,” Anna said excitedly. “Elsa, you’re the best sister ever. Thank you. How did you have the time to plan a whole party?”

Elsa saw the snowman shadow start to dance. “Oh, I had some help. Do you think you can get away from your duties to keep Kristoff distracted?”

“Not a problem,” Anna told her, fixing her eyes on Elsa. “All my meetings today were canceled. Apparently, there is a cold going around. Even the Vesterland dinner we were supposed to host tonight had to be postponed because Mari was under the weather, too.”

“You don’t say.” Elsa predicted they’d all have a miraculous recovery right around the time printed on the invitation.

“It’s a shame, because Olina has been cooking and baking all morning.” Anna sniffed the air. “I can smell the chocolate and butter from here.” She brightened. “Hey. Maybe you can use whatever Olina made for the party.”

Elsa suppressed the urge to laugh. “Great idea. I’ll ask her.”

Anna thought for a moment. "I just need to think of a reason to get Kristoff out of the castle."

Elsa tried to play it cool. "I already thought of one. Tell him you need to pick up some cookies for a special holiday-themed game night we're going to have since I'm here early." Elsa pulled a list out of her pocket.

Anna read it over and paused. "You ordered seven different types of cookies and pastries from seven different bakeries and villagers?"

"Having the seven cookies of Arendelle at a gathering is a holiday tradition," Elsa reminded her. "The more stops you make, the longer you keep Kristoff busy. Plus, I knew you wouldn't want to leave any of the kingdom's bakers off the list."

"True. Guess we'll be doing a lot of taste-testing along the way," Anna said resolutely as the clock in the village began to toll. "You can count on us."

The snowman shadow around the corner continued to dance around.

Anna started to walk backward. "I'll just go change out of this gown, get Kristoff, and then we'll be out of your hair."

The shadow stopped dancing.

"Don't change!" Elsa blurted out, and Anna faltered. "I mean, you look lovely. And besides, cookie taste-testing is kind of official queen business. You want to look your best."

Anna grinned. "What would I do without you? I'll go call on Kristoff and be right back!"

As Anna ran in one direction, Elsa realized Kristoff was making his way down the hall from the other direction with Sven. Elsa tried to block Anna's retreating figure from view. Kristoff had on a blue dress coat and a white shirt that he seemed to find too tight around the collar. His hair was even slicked back and tamed. Elsa tried not to laugh at the sight of her sister's fiancé all dressed up.

"Can't believe all our deliveries were canceled today," Kristoff said in his Sven voice.

"Good thing Olina took all our ice deliveries for that Vesterland dinner she said we're having tonight," Kristoff told Sven. "There's nothing worse than wasted ice." Kristoff saw Elsa and smiled. "Elsa, hi! I thought you weren't coming back till next week."

"Surprise," Elsa said, and saw the snowman shadow in the doorway start to boogie. "You're just the person I was looking for, too."

“Me?” Kristoff looked surprised.

“I was hoping you could help me with a surprise for Anna,” Elsa said.

Kristoff’s cheeks reddened at the name of his fiancée. “I’d do anything for Anna. What do you need?”

“I was hoping you and Sven could keep her away from the castle this afternoon so I can set up a spa retreat for her,” Elsa told him, putting a cool hand on his shoulder. “She’s been working so hard, I thought she could use some pampering.”

“That’s a great idea,” Kristoff said.

“I knew you’d agree.” Elsa smiled. “The stewards are going to set up a room for her to relax in with lots of aromatherapy and a massage treatment. All we need is some time to set everything up. Do you think you can keep Anna distracted?”

“Sure,” Kristoff said without hesitation, “if she doesn’t have meetings.”

Elsa cut him off. “All canceled. There’s a cold going around.” She pulled another slip of paper out of her pocket. “All you need to do is tell Anna you guys have to make seven stops this afternoon to seven bakeries to —”

“Pick up the traditional seven holiday cookies and pastries?” Kristoff guessed. “One of Sven’s and my favorite Arendelle traditions.” He nudged the reindeer. “Am I right?”

“I just wish one of the baked goods was carrot cake,” Kristoff said for Sven, and the reindeer nodded.

“Well, you can make that suggestion this afternoon when you visit all the shops and homes in the village,” Elsa said. “Tell Anna the cookies are for a taste-testing we’re all going to do at the Vesterland dinner tonight. The dinner will be right at sunset, so afterward, it’s all about pampering Anna.”

“Great diversion,” Kristoff said confidentially. “She’ll jump at the chance to show off Arendelle’s baked goods. She and Mari seem to have some sort of competition going about the best cookie in the world.”

“I’ve heard them debate that.” Elsa nodded. “So take your time. Enjoy the village! Sample some sweets! You can bring Anna back around sunset for the Vesterland dinner and then it’s on to her spa day.”

Kristoff scratched his head. “Spa *day*?”

Elsa paused. The snowman shadow stopped dancing again. “It’s more like a spa night. The evening is more relaxing anyway.”

“That’s true,” Kristoff agreed. “I’ll just go change. Kai left this outfit out for me this morning. Something about looking nice today. The shirt is pretty constricting.” He pulled at the tight collar around his neck.

“You know what? I think you should stay in that outfit,” Elsa said quickly. “Anna will be all dressed up since cookie sampling is official business. You are her consort, after all.”

Kristoff sighed and pulled at his shirt again. “Fine. But only because this is for Anna. She could use a relaxing night off.” He looked around. “I just have to find her.”

“No need,” Elsa said, as Anna came running back around the corner.

“There you are!” Anna said to Kristoff, eyeing Elsa as if the two were in on a big secret.

Kristoff, ironically, gave Elsa the same look. “I was just coming to find you.”

“Really? I was coming to find *you*,” Anna said with a laugh. “I need you to help me—”

“Pick up cookies from all the Arendelle shops and bakers?” Kristoff supplied. “Elsa already told me. I am at your service.”

Sven snorted and his ears perked up. He seemed to be looking right at Elsa as if he just knew something was going on. Elsa maintained her innocence and glanced out the nearest window at the clock in the square. Time was ticking.

“Well, now that you’re both here, and you both know what you need to do, you should get going.” Elsa pushed Anna and Kristoff toward each other and clasped their hands together. “See you both tonight!”

Sven seemed to give Elsa a questioning look as the three headed down the hallway, with Kristoff and Anna debating the best cookie on their list.

Olaf waited till the pair disappeared to pop his head out from the doorway. “I think Sven is on to you.”

“You might be right, but the important thing is, Anna and Kristoff bought it.” Elsa opened the nearest window and called for Gale. She held up a note that the Wind Spirit took. “Please let Bulda, Cliff, and the other trolls know we’re ready for them. We have a lot to set up and not a lot of time to do it.” The Wind Spirit carried the note away.

“Thanks, Gale! Come along, everyone!” Olaf shouted. “Operation Anna and Kristoff’s Engagement Party is a Go! Go! Go!”

A flurry of castle staff and villagers came out of every closed door in the hallway. Two stewards were carrying an ice sculpture of their queen and her ice man. Several others had bouquets of crocuses, the official flower of Arendelle, while another group from Blodget's Bakery carried trays of eplekake (apple cake was a favorite of both Anna's and Kristoff's, especially when served with caramel sauce and vanilla ice cream) and a chocolate cake she knew her sister would flip for. Olin was making King Agnarr's favorite dry-rubbed roasted pork tenderloin, which Anna would love as a nod to their parents being part of the day. As far as Elsa could tell, everything was going as planned. She hoped. "Come on, Olaf. Let's start decorating the courtyard."

"Ready!" Olaf clapped his stick arms together. "I love engagement parties! I don't think I've ever been to one before, but I already know I'm going to like them. Especially since this one is a surprise."

"Olaf, it is still a surprise, right?" Elsa asked gently. "Anna doesn't know anything, does she?"

"Nope!" Olaf said. "You only told me an hour ago."

An hour, Elsa had learned, was still a long time for a snowman to keep a secret.

"Just checking," Elsa said. "Remember: your job is to be on the lookout for Anna and Kristoff."

"I will keep my eyes peeled!" Olaf promised. "For now, all I see is our party planner."

"Hoo-hoo!" said someone with a familiar accent. The giant of a man approaching had red hair and was wearing a green beanie and a matching green sweater that had the word **ENGAGED** knitted on the front along with images of Anna and Kristoff. "We don't have much time, ja? We have to move quick."

It was Oaken, or in this case, Oaken of Oaken's Hearty Party-Planning Service... and Sauna. Elsa had no idea Oaken even did party planning, but when she and Kristoff's family had started thinking about how to toast the happy couple, Oaken had appeared out of nowhere.

So had his sauna.

In fact, right at that moment, two men came around a corner rolling a rectangular sauna that was no bigger than a closet.

"Oaken, why would we need a sauna at the party?" Elsa asked.

"Everyone likes a good schvitz," Oaken said.

“I love a good schvitz!” Olaf agreed. “Although a schvitz doesn’t always agree with me.”

Elsa held her head. This was going to be a long four hours.

THREE AND A HALF HOURS TILL THE PARTY

“Let’s go eat some cookies!” Anna cheered as Sven pulled their sled out of the castle and into the snowy streets. “Where should we go first?”

“Maybe the farthest location?” Kristoff suggested. He was starting to sweat at the thought of keeping Anna distracted for hours without letting anything slip. “No need to rush back to the castle when it’s such a nice day.”

They both looked up. The Arendelle sky was its typical wintry self: gray and a bit windy. Neither acknowledged the lack of sunshine.

“Let me look at the list Elsa gave me and see where the farthest bakery is,” Anna said, pulling her paper out at the same time as Kristoff pulled out his list. “Elsa made you a list, too?”

“Yeah.” Kristoff looked confused. “She gave you one, too?”

“Maybe in case one of us lost one?” Anna guessed. They put their heads together and looked at their stops.

Pick up COOKIES AND BAKED GOODS today!

1. Krumkaker from Blodget’s Bakery
2. Bordstabelbakkels from Waffle Brothers
3. Fattigmann from the Olsens
4. Sandkaker from the Haugens
5. Sirupssnipper from Tomally’s Baked Goods
6. Berlinerkranser from the Bergs
7. Smultringer from Gerda

“Wow, Arendelle has a lot of bakers,” Anna realized.

“Tell me about it. And they’re all over Arendelle.” He pointed to the last one on the list. “Our last stop is the castle. Not that we should rush to get back,” Kristoff said.

“Absolutely not,” Anna agreed hurriedly. “Taste-testing cookies takes time.”

“Lots of time,” Kristoff agreed.

Sven made a strange noise, and Kristoff looked at him over the top of the sled. “Did you say something, buddy?”

“Nope!” Kristoff said in his Sven voice.

Kristoff and Anna glanced at each other, then looked away. Neither saw the other one gulp.

“Tomally’s is the farthest stop,” Anna said, pointing to one of the bakeries on the list. “That’s all the way up in the mountains. How does Elsa even know about that place?”

“I don’t know,” Kristoff realized. “Is that the one that makes the syrup snap snowman cookies? I love those.”

Anna heard Sven lick his lips.

“Yep! It’s pretty far, though,” Anna observed. “Like maybe too far. It could take two hours to get there and back, and we need to stop at all seven places on this list and be home by sunset.”

“Sunset?” Kristoff froze. “Who said anything about sunset?”

“I didn’t say anything about sunset. Did I say sunset?” Anna asked, her voice getting squeaky.

“Well, *I* didn’t say anything about sunset. Nope! Although sunset is a good time to get home. For dinner. Not that we’re having dinner. Maybe we’re relaxing or getting a massage, or not. Who needs a massage?” Kristoff swallowed hard and pulled at his collar. “Let’s just get to Tomally’s and go from there.”

“Good idea. Go slow, but not too slow, Sven.” Anna glanced at the clock in the village as they passed it. “We have plenty of time... I think.”

THREE HOURS BEFORE THE PARTY

Gale was helping Elsa and Olaf hang a large banner across the courtyard that read CONGRATULATIONS, ANNA AND KRISTOFF! when there was a sound like rolling thunder. Oaken stopped placing his hand-carved wooden business calling cards on each chair and looked up. Every table and chair in the courtyard began to shake.

“Here they come!” Olaf cheered.

All eyes went to the gates of the castle as a few dozen boulders rolled quickly down the path that connected the village to the castle and came to a stop in the courtyard. One of the boulders leading the pack bounced into the air and unfurled in front of Elsa.

“My Kristoff is getting married!” Bulda sounded both teary and elated at the same time. “I can’t believe my boy is all grown up and finally

marrying a girl! And not just any girl—Anna!”

Olaf cheered. “I’m happy, too. For a while, I thought Kristoff might be marrying Sven.”

“Thank you for coming a bit early.” Elsa glanced at the sky, which was just starting to darken. With the winter solstice around the corner, daylight hours were shorter—perfect, since the trolls usually only awoke at night.

“Of course! Of course! We’re so excited!” Bulda said as, all around her, trolls began unfurling and moving in the courtyard to check out what Elsa and Olaf had already done with the help of the staff of the castle, who watched the trolls with interest.

Elsa had to admit—hiring Oaken’s party-planning service had been the right move. The courtyard had been outfitted with the traditional holiday decor, with wreaths, boughs of holly, and festive tablescapes making the castle look like a winter wonderland. Lanterns hung on ropes over the tables and were placed strategically around the courtyard, giving the whole area a romantic glow, and in the center of everything was an ice sculpture of Anna and Kristoff. For a finishing touch, Elsa had planned to create a very light snowfall as the party started. It was elegant. It screamed Arendelle. This party was fit for her sister and her future brother-in-law. She sighed with happiness.

There was the sound of a crash across the courtyard, and Elsa and Bulda looked over.

The Kristoff and Anna ice sculpture had been knocked onto its side.

“Oh no!” Elsa cried.

“Sorry!” yelled a troll, righting the sculpture that was now missing something important. “Don’t worry! I made it better-looking.”

Olaf gasped and held his twig arms up to his face. “Anna and Kristoff have lost their heads!”

Bulda chuckled. “No, no! We’re just replacing them with traditional troll heads. It’s custom to have rock sculptures in a couple’s likeness at a wedding ceremony. Look how beautiful these are!”

Several trolls had piled on one another to reach the top of the sculpture, where they stuck small troll heads with grass hair on the top. All the trolls cheered.

Elsa guessed this was fine—she wanted Bulda and the trolls to feel comfortable at the party, too. But when she looked closer, she had to hide her surprise at the Anna and Kristoff doppelgängers. Apparently, the trolls

thought her future brother-in-law was a lot hairier than he appeared. Moss and grass were sticking out of his ears and his nostrils. Anna, on the other hand, had hair that was long and wild, which, to be fair, Elsa had to admit was the way her sister's hair looked when she woke up.

At that very moment, two trolls walked by carrying a wooden canopy festooned with fungus, moss, and dandelions. The smell was overpowering.

"Ooh! What's that?" Olaf asked, following the trolls.

"The traditional wedding canopy," Bulda said proudly. "We made it for our Kristoff."

"Bulda, you realize they aren't getting married today, right?" Elsa said, feeling her fingers begin to tingle again. She wrinkled her nose and held in the need to sneeze for fear a few snowgies might appear. Things were already a bit hectic as it was.

"Yes, yes, but they should pose under it, as we'll want to bless it before their actual wedding in the valley," Bulda said.

"The valley?" Elsa repeated. Anna needed to get married here, at the castle, but she kept her mouth shut, or rather, half shut as she gaped at the canopy being placed over the head table. The trolls' movements knocked over two unlit lanterns, which sent several plates crashing to the floor.

"My tablescape!" Oaken said, running over in a panic.

"You don't need those! We brought nicer plates," Bulda told Elsa. "They're carved out of wood. We even have moss tablecloths." A few trolls began unrolling one.

"Umm..." Elsa started to say. She wasn't sure how to put this delicately.

"Wow, that smells just like Kristoff after an ice delivery!" Olaf said with glee. "And now it's going on the table. With food."

Oaken rushed in to stop the trolls. "Hoo-hoo! I've already set the table. It looks nice. Ja?"

"It will look better with the moss tablecloth," said Cliff, Kristoff's troll dad, somewhat indignantly.

"No, no," said Oaken. "This table is fit for the queen."

"So is this tablecloth," said Cliff. "It's a present from Grand Pabbie, and it needs to be with Anna and Kristoff. It's tradition!"

"It's tradition," Bulda echoed, looking at Elsa pleadingly. "We have to use it for our boy. We're just so happy for the couple and thankful you've made us part of the party planning." Her eyes began to fill with tears again.

Elsa bit her tongue. If Kristoff and Anna wanted to eat on a bed of moss, who was she to stop them? “Of course. We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Bulda smiled, revealing her teeth, and rolled away to help Cliff.

“Nice save,” Olaf whispered in Elsa’s ear.

“Elsa!” Oaken frantically rushed over. “They’re changing all my work!”

Elsa looked around. In just a few minutes, the trolls had taken down the holly and replaced it with boughs of grass. The whole courtyard suddenly smelled like earth. This was not at all the party she had been picturing for Anna and Kristoff’s engagement.

“Wow, this is different,” Olaf said, as if hearing her thoughts. “Feels like we’re back in the Enchanted Forest.”

“The only difference is we’re in Arendelle and we’re celebrating the queen as well as Kristoff,” Elsa murmured worriedly. “What are Anna and Kristoff going to think of all this?”

TWO HOURS BEFORE THE PARTY

“That took longer than expected, but it was delicious,” Kristoff said, licking his fingers as they sledded back into the village. He burped. “I think I had too much sirupssnipper, though. And jelly rings.” He patted his stomach, not noticing that jelly caked the front of his white shirt.

Anna dusted off her dress, which had white powder all over the front. “I think I got a little too close to the powdered sugar. It was yummy, but I’m going to have to change before tonight.”

Kristoff looked at her strangely. “Tonight? You’re probably just going to be wearing your robe. I mean, not just your robe, uh...” Kristoff gulped.

“Why do I need a robe?” Anna asked.

“You don’t! I meant pajamas.”

“Pajamas? For a party? I mean game night,” Anna said, and covered her mouth.

“What game night?” Kristoff asked. “I meant you don’t have to look nice tonight, even though you always look nice. Always!” He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Sven? Help, please?”

Sven seemed to groan.

Anna bit her lip. “I meant clean up, you know, before our next stop. A queen shouldn’t be covered in powdered sugar in front of her future in-

laws.”

Sven snorted. Kristoff sat up straighter. “Did you say ‘in-laws’?”

Anna was still going. “Maybe I can have Gerda help me change quick, and you, too. You should look nice for... wait.” She did a double take. “You already look nice. Why are you dressed up, anyway? The Vesterland dinner was canceled.”

“Elsa said I should look nice on official business,” Kristoff said with a shrug. “Even if it’s uncomfortable. Wait. Did you say the Vesterland dinner was canceled? No it’s not. It got moved up so that Elsa could plan the—”

“Plan what? Game night?” Anna asked, confused. “I thought that’s why you looked so nice. Not that you don’t always look nice, too. You look nicer. Nicer-er?” She started to perspire and wiped her brow, getting powdered sugar from her sleeve onto her nose. “Sven? Help.”

Sven groaned again.

Kristoff wiped the powder off Anna’s nose. “Forget everything we both just said! The point is we are not going back to the castle to change.”

“Good,” Anna said, relieved.

Kristoff glanced at the clock in the village as they passed it. “We still have six stops. Let’s continue on to the Olsens’.”

“Yes! The Olsens’.” Anna looked at her list. “It’s time for fattigmann.”

ONE AND A HALF HOURS BEFORE THE PARTY

“Wreaths!”

“Moss garland!”

“Wreaths!”

“Moss garland!”

Cliff and Oaken were currently in a standoff over the superior engagement party decor, and the party’s start time was only an hour and a half away. Or less if Kristoff and Anna came back early. Now the party looked less put together than it had an hour ago.

Bulda was debating with one of Oaken’s workers the better seating option—rock or actual chair. The stewards kept removing moss tablecloths, and the trolls kept putting them back on. The troll choir and the children’s choir, who had agreed to team up to serenade the happy couple, had since decided they couldn’t agree on a song. An argument had even broken out over the punch bowl—the trolls wanted to add lichen, and Oaken had gagged at the thought.

“Olaf,” said Elsa, surveying the chaos. “This party is turning into a disaster. What are we going to do?”

“About the decor or the fact that Anna and Kristoff are back in the village and getting closer?” Olaf pointed with a stick finger toward the open gates where Anna, Kristoff, and Sven were gliding by. The two appeared to be talking animatedly.

Did they know she’d tricked them both?

Elsa used her ice magic to close the gates so they couldn’t see inside the courtyard. Then she turned to Olaf.

“You need to tell whoever is next to last on that list to stall them,” she said.

“Even if Anna and Kristoff have already figured out that you created an elaborate ruse to trick them both and they somehow both let slip to each other what they think is actually going on even if that’s not what’s happening, but they decide to come back here anyway?” Olaf asked. “Wow, that was a lot of words to say in one breath.” He held his stomach by the center coal.

Elsa felt her panic rising. “Just make up something to keep them out there. Please?”

“On it!” Olaf said, toddling toward the gates.

ONE HOUR TILL THE PARTY

“I feel kind of bad we rushed through all those stops,” said Kristoff, eyeing the stacks of boxes of cookies now nestled in the sled behind them.

“We had to. We’re running out of time,” Anna said, staring at the almost darkened sky. “We’ve made it to Blodget’s, the Waffle Brothers’, the Olsens’, and the Haugens’. All that’s left before Gerda is the Bergs’.” Anna eyed a house all lit up with candles in the windows and a wreath on the front door that brought out the green painted trim. “We’re in luck! They’re on this very street.”

Kristoff pulled to a stop out front, jumped out of the sled, and then helped Anna out, too. They’d just made it to the door when it flew open. A dozen finely dressed people were standing in the doorway, looking gobsmacked to see them.

“Queen Anna! What are you doing here?” said the woman in front, hiding a bouquet of crocuses behind her back.

“We’re here to pick up the cookies Elsa ordered for...” Anna wasn’t sure how to finish that sentence. She kept messing it up.

“For game night, or maybe it’s the dinner with Vesterland,” Kristoff said.

A small girl handed Kristoff the cookies and then began to giggle. “No, sillies! The cookies are for the party!”

Everyone in the house turned and shushed her.

“Party?” Anna started to laugh. “We’re not having a party to celebrate anything, like, say, a certain anniversary or career choice.”

Kristoff laughed awkwardly, too. “No! Not a party! Not a spa day, either!”

They looked at each other suspiciously.

“Spa day?” Anna asked.

“Anniversary party?” Kristoff questioned.

“Hi there!” Olaf pushed his way to the door.

“Olaf, what are you doing here?” Anna asked.

“Elsa had a feeling you two were taking too long, so she asked me to find you!”

“So she wants us to come back early?” Kristoff asked.

In front of the house, Sven seemed to be grunting and snorting a lot. Olaf looked at the reindeer warily.

“Um... well, no. No. That’s not it. Elsa asked me to...” Olaf looked like he wanted to melt. “Elsa told me to come help with all the cookies. With you! Because... because...”

Sven was snorting madly.

“Don’t say it, Olaf,” the little girl whispered.

“So neither of you ruined the surprise.” Olaf exhaled. “Oh, good. I didn’t actually say that the surprise was for the both of you, just that it was a surprise. See? I can keep a secret.”

“Surprise for both of us?” Anna and Kristoff questioned at the same time.

“Excuse me,” Olaf said, rushing past them to the reindeer and taking a cookie with him along the way. “Sven and I have to go.”

“Wait!” Kristoff called as Olaf jumped on the reindeer’s back and unhooked him from the sled. “Sven is our ride!”

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES BEFORE THE PARTY

Olaf rushed through the gates on Sven's back and faced Elsa. "The jig is up. They know."

"How?" Elsa groaned.

"They had a lot of questions," Olaf told her. "It was stressful."

In the background was a lot of yelling. "Never mind that," Elsa said. "We have bigger problems. Look at the courtyard!"

Everywhere Elsa looked, trolls and stewards, Oaken and his workers, were arguing over the decor! The menu! Where to put the sauna! Footwear!

"Why are people shouting about shoes?" Olaf asked.

"Bulda feels it would be nice if everyone was barefoot, while Oaken said it would be improper to show the queen's feet unless she was wearing someone's hand-knit socks—or ones you could buy at the trading post," Elsa said, sounding exasperated. "Apparently it's troll tradition to not wear socks at a party."

Olaf held up a snowball foot. "No complaints here. But, um, why is the sauna smoking?"

Elsa looked up. "Oh no."

The sauna had steam billowing out its top, and several trolls were dancing around it singing some sort of gathering song. Oaken's workers were trying to shoo them away so they could fix whatever was wrong, but the trolls wouldn't leave.

"Hoo-hoo, Queen Elsa! I need your help here!" Oaken yelled over.

"Queen Elsa!" Bulda did the same. "So do I!"

"Coming!" Elsa looked at Olaf. "The question is: Who is going to help me?"

THIRTY MINUTES BEFORE THE PARTY

"Do you think Elsa is lying to both of us?" Anna pressed Kristoff as the two trudged by foot through the village streets with as many boxes of cookies as they could carry. The Bergs and the rest of the people at their house had said something about somewhere they needed to be and left them behind.

"Elsa?" Kristoff asked. "Lie? I don't see it." He paused. "Although, she did keep Ahtohallan from you at first by not telling you about the voice she was hearing."

“Exactly!” Anna said, trying to balance three boxes of cookies in her arms. “All I know is that she told you to keep me busy this afternoon, but you won’t say why.”

“Lips are sealed,” Kristoff commented as he held on to four boxes of cookies from the Bergs. “And she told *you* to keep *me* busy, but *you* won’t tell me what’s going on, either.”

“I’m a vault!” Anna declared. She watched a bunch of villagers sneak out of their homes and down the street, much like the Bergs had done after pushing cookies into Anna’s and Kristoff’s hands. “She’s up to something, though.”

“Maybe she’s preoccupied with work,” Kristoff guessed. “Being the fifth spirit comes with lots of responsibility, you know.” He gently nudged her with his shoulder. “Just like being queen of Arendelle does.”

“True, but I don’t want her to hide things from me,” Anna said. “I hate secrets. I’m bad at them.”

“Me too,” Kristoff admitted. “Good and bad secrets. Wanting to ask you to marry me was a hard secret to keep, even though I had trouble asking you.”

“I can imagine,” said Anna, as the clock began to chime. “At least the secrets we both tried to keep today—badly—are almost up. Let’s get to the castle. No matter what’s happening, we both know we need to be there at sunset, and that time is now.”

PARTY TIME (AT LEAST IT’S SUPPOSED TO BE)

The sound of everyone yelling was hurting Elsa’s ears.

She looked at Olaf. “What are we going to do about everyone? They can’t agree on anything!”

“I don’t know,” Olaf said, looking worried himself. “It’s a shame everyone can’t just stop and remember why we’re here—to give Anna and Kristoff a warm hug. Isn’t that what an engagement party is? A celebration because we’re happy they found each other?”

Elsa looked at Olaf in surprise before leaning down to give him a hug. “You, my friend, always know the right thing to say. This group needs a reminder.” She turned to the others. “Everyone? Could I have your attention for a moment?”

Slowly Cliff, Bulda, the trolls, the stewards, Oaken and his party planners, the troll and children’s choirs, and Olaf gathered round.

“We’re all here because we love Anna and Kristoff and want what’s best for them,” Elsa began, “but I’m afraid that’s not really showing with all the arguments going on.”

Behind Elsa, as if for effect, the engagement banner, which was now covered in moss, crashed to the ground.

“We just want to include some troll traditions,” Bulda explained. “So our boy knows how much we love him.”

“And Anna deserves a party fit for a queen, ja?” Oaken countered, and the stewards nodded.

“Why can’t this party be both?” Elsa asked. “A mix of *both* worlds, just like Anna and Kristoff? They should see the best of each of our traditions.”

Olaf leaned into Elsa. “Nicely put.”

The entire group was quiet for a moment. Slowly they started to approach one another.

“I guess we don’t have to have moss on every table,” Cliff said begrudgingly, and looked at Oaken.

“Not every table, ja? But the moss does look nice on some—like where you’re all going to sit. And I like the canopy over Kristoff’s and Anna’s seats.”

“It is lovely, isn’t it? As are the bouquets of crocuses on each table,” said Bulda, walking off with Oaken. “Now that I think about it, the straw grass I added might be overkill.”

“We could sing two songs,” Elsa heard Little Rock, a small troll Kristoff was close to, say to a choir girl named Hedda.

“Good idea! Two songs are better than one anyway,” said Hedda.

Within minutes, everyone was discussing what should stay and what should go and how they could help one another.

Elsa smiled at Olaf. “Thanks to your wisdom, I have a feeling Anna and Kristoff are going to think this is the best engagement party ever.”

Olaf peered out a hole in the castle gates. “That’s good, because it looks like everyone is already here!”

PARTY TIME (FOR REAL)

“I cannot believe the gates are closed,” Anna said, standing in front of the castle on her tippy-toes trying to peer through a small gate window in indignation. “This feels wrong on so many levels, and not just because I’m

queen.” She could hear a lot of movement and talking, including laughter from inside the castle courtyard.

Kristoff put his boxes of cookies down on the ground, next to Anna’s boxes, and walked over to her.

Anna felt a warm hand on her shoulder. “All right, Ms. Feisty Pants, let’s give Elsa a minute. Maybe whatever this surprise is for you... or for me... or for us, it’s still coming together.”

For you or for me. Olaf’s slipup followed by Kristoff’s words made Anna wonder: Could Elsa have tricked them because the surprise was for both of them?

Anna looked up at him. “I’m not sure you know this about me, fiancé, but I have a hard time sitting out on things. I’m a doer.”

Kristoff pulled her into his arms. “Oh, I know, and I love that about you. But maybe—just this once—Elsa is keeping us both busy because she doesn’t need either of our help on this one. She wants to do this on her own. So let’s let her. All right?”

Anna beamed up at him. “All right. We’ll wait—quietly, without protesting—for her to tell us she’s ready.” She kissed him.

By the time the kiss was over, the gates were opening and there were Elsa and Bulda waiting.

“Surprise!” Bulda shouted before anyone else could. “Happy engagement!”

“Happy engagement!” The trolls, Oaken, the villagers, and the stewards cheered.

More townsfolk—the Bergs, the Olsens, Mrs. Blodget, the Waffle Brothers—came streaming in from all sides of the castle courtyard. Anna and Kristoff watched in wonder as the whole world, troll and human, seemed to appear to celebrate them.

“It’s our engagement party,” Anna said, looking at Kristoff in surprise. “I can’t believe it.”

When all was said and done, Elsa had to admit the mix of earthy touches and castle elegance came together in a truly inspired way that was distinctly Anna and Kristoff. Looking at General Mattias chatting with Grand Pabbie, Elsa couldn’t imagine it any other way. This was the party they were meant to have.

“This place looks amazing!” Kristoff gushed, bending down to give Bulda a hug. “I love the ice slash troll sculptures. I’m not sure you got my

hair right, though.”

“It’s beautiful! You pulled all this off in the last four hours?” Anna asked Elsa.

“Yep,” Elsa said, smiling at Oaken, who was showing Mrs. Olsen and Cliff the personal sauna he’d brought for the evening. “But I was lucky. I had a lot of help. I couldn’t have done it without Bulda and the others. This was a team effort.”

Kristoff smiled and Bulda blew her nose into a moss handkerchief. “We’re just so happy for you two lovebirds! I knew this day would come the moment we saw our Anna for the first time.”

“*Our* Anna,” Anna repeated softly. “I’m really part of the family now.”

“That you are!” Cliff agreed.

“And family,” Elsa reminded Anna, “works together. I’m sorry I shut you out. I just thought you two both deserved a surprise, and pulling that off took some creative thinking. I knew I had to make you both believe you were helping the other one if I was going to keep you away from the castle for a few hours. Plus, I worried Kristoff would stress if he knew the scale of this party.”

“You know me so well, Elsa,” Kristoff said.

They all laughed.

“You know the best part? Now we have lots of cookies for everyone!” said Olaf, balancing a tower of cookie boxes in his arms. The rest were atop Sven’s back.

Kristoff quickly helped unload the boxes while Bulda and Cliff each took them over to several of the tables where trolls and the people of Arendelle sat together, toasting the happy couple, just as Elsa envisioned they would.

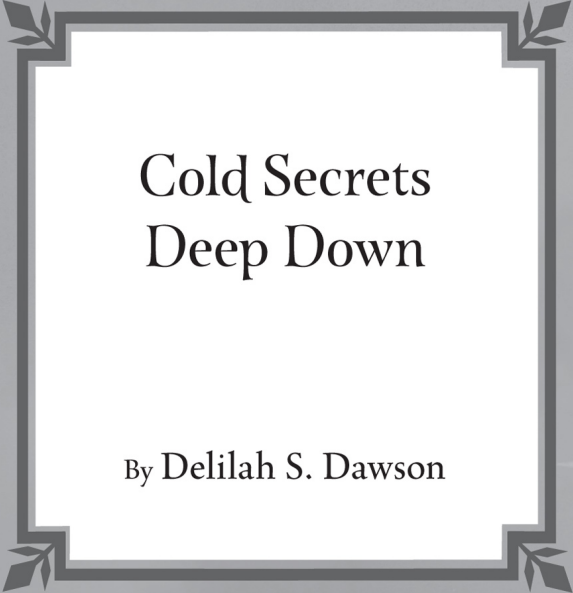
Anna took Elsa’s hand in her own. “I love what you did here—it’s our world and Kristoff’s, and you pulled off the perfect surprise.”

“You didn’t figure out what I was up to?” Elsa asked.

Anna just smiled. “Didn’t have a clue.”

Elsa squeezed Anna’s hand and looked at Kristoff. “Congratulations, you two. I’m so happy for you both.”

“I’m happy for all of us,” Olaf said, jumping on Sven’s back and coming in close so that they could share Elsa’s favorite thing of all: a group hug.



Cold Secrets Deep Down

By Delilah S. Dawson



The day was balmy and blue, the sea a deep, sparkling emerald flecked with white. Some of that white was playful foam that billowed up each time waves bashed the neat frigate cutting across the water, and some of that white was courtesy of a certain seasick snowman.

“You didn’t tell us you got motion sickness,” Anna said, patting Olaf on the back.

“Ask Elsa. She’s the one who made me this way!” Olaf moaned.

“Look at the horizon,” suggested a canny old sailor named Frode, who stroked his long gray beard as he watched Olaf heave snowballs over the side of the ship. “That should settle ye.”

“I don’t even know what ‘ye’ is,” Olaf said. “But I don’t think I have one.”

Everyone else, at least, seemed to have proper sea legs. Sven had to brace himself on the slick deck, hooves spread wide, but he enjoyed the brisk air and stood near the bow with Kristoff as the ship dipped up and down in the waves. Anna was excited by the adventure and wanted nothing more than to run from one end of the ship to the other so she could see everything, but Olaf was currently demanding all her attention. Elsa, of course, was more than happy to be so near the wild water, smiling each time a breaking wave hit the ship. As for General Mattias, he had brought his sweetheart, Halima, along to enjoy the diplomatic mission to the province of Liljeby. The crossing was expected to be calm and uneventful, and the two lovebirds sat side by side on a couple of barrels, enjoying the breeze as his guards kept watch. Of course, the only thing to watch at the moment was a nauseated talking snowman.

“Look! Dolphins!” Elsa called, pointing off to the side of the ship, where sleek gray bodies arced in and out of the rippling sea.

“I always wanted to see a—*urghblah!*” Olaf cried.

“Dunno what an urghblah is,” Frode said, “but I’ve been at sea for fifty years and ne’er heard o’ one.”

Captain Jens kept a tight ship, and he'd been scouting this area for years and claimed to know every inch of the sea's fathomless depths. A few of the older sailors fished off the side, pulling in the occasional cod or haddock, while the younger deckhands moved around the ship with cheerful confidence, doing their duties and sidestepping the little white snowballs that rolled here and there with the pitching deck. A young deckhand stepped in one and muttered, "Ugh," as he scraped it off on a rail.

"Sorry," Olaf said, sitting up and wiping his mouth with a branch. "Hopefully, they'll melt soon. Kinda wish water didn't have memory, just now."

Anna stood and put her arm around Elsa's waist. "I still can't believe it. Our first time on a big ship! Well, you're no stranger to the sea, of course, but I'm just so excited. I've always wanted to see dolphins!"

Elsa moved a lock of windblown red hair out of Anna's face. "You're not scared at all? After what happened to Mother and Father, I wondered if you'd ever go on a sea voyage...."

"Maybe a little scared," Anna admitted. "But I have you with me. And Kristoff and Sven."

"And Olaf!" the snowman muttered. "Even if I'm more of an emotional support snowman than a protector at this point."

"And Olaf," Anna said with a fond smile.

"I wonder what it will be like in Liljeby." Elsa fussed with the ties of her cape. "I know word of my powers has spread, and the stories have sometimes grown in the telling...."

"That ridiculous diplomat from the Southern Isles thought you were made of ice, remember?" Anna chuckled. "He brought a fur coat, just in case. I'm glad you came along for the trip, though. The people of Liljeby will see you for what you are: a princess of Arendelle."

"With superpowers!" Olaf piped up. "A super princess! Suprincess? No, that sounds too much like soup."

"I suppose I'll never be normal...." Elsa trailed off.

"Normal is overrated," Sven said in what sounded a little bit like Kristoff's voice.

"Of course a talking reindeer would say that. You're perfect, Elsa, and we wouldn't have you any other way." Anna squeezed her sister's waist and went to join her fiancé and his four-legged best friend.

Standing at the rail, she looked out to the horizon, the world divided into clear blue above and deep green below. They were far enough from Arendelle now that there was nothing visible but water and sky in any direction. If her magically gifted sister hadn't felt such a kinship with the water, and if Captain Jens hadn't been so capable and the ship so new and sturdy, Anna might've been a little worried. After seeing her parents' ship, she could never forget the unexpected things that could happen at sea. But as it was, the day was beautiful and she was with the people—and reindeer, and snowman—she loved best in the world.

She couldn't believe she was the queen of Arendelle now, and that it was up to her to make an appearance at the Liljeby summer festival. She had an exquisite new gown of spring green, embroidered with lilies and bluebells and a delicate tiara that didn't squeeze her head quite as much as her diadem back home. Elsa's powder-blue dress shared the same flowers along the hem, though her tiara was much smaller. Anna often wondered if Elsa minded that she was no longer queen, but as she watched her older sister gaze out into the sea, laughing at the antics of the dolphins racing their ship, she knew that what Elsa wanted most of all was freedom—the freedom to be herself and explore her powers and the world around her.

There was a deep sigh and a depressed squelching, and Olaf appeared at her side.

"As someone who's mostly made of water, I'm disappointed in myself," he said with that newfound maturity he'd been gaining.

"You can't help what you are," Anna said with a chuckle.

"Besides, you're probably the first snowman to ever set foot on a boat," Kristoff added.

"And I hope I'll be the last. My permafrost is all jiggly. This must be what middle age feels like."

Anna reached down and rearranged his hair twigs. "Discomfort is just the middle of the journey," she reminded him. "We've got to be halfway there. Right, Frode?"

The old sailor looked up from his fishing pole and gazed out into the brisk air, squinting. "Not quite halfway," he said. "You'll get used to it, me icy lad. Sea's not even that choppy today. No fish without bones, as my farfar always told me."

"A fish without bones would be way too floppy. Even I, without bones, understand that," Olaf said sniffily.

“It’s a proverb,” Anna told him. “He just means that even the nicest things aren’t perfect.”

“I’m glad you have bones, Anna.” Olaf looked into her eyes, smiling, before running to the rail and letting loose another volley of snowballs.

“Anna, come see!” Elsa called, and Anna kissed Kristoff on the cheek and patted Sven on the head before moving to the rear of the boat, where Elsa was looking down. “There’s a rainbow, see?” Elsa pointed to where the mist made by leaping dolphins shimmered in pastel hues. “I didn’t know water could do that.”

“The sea is so—”

But Anna couldn’t finish her sentence, because the ship juddered suddenly, throwing her to the ground as the wood creaked and groaned. Elsa was able to stay upright since she had a hand on the railing, and as she helped Anna stand, the ship fell into absolute chaos.

“To the harpoons!” Captain Jens called. “To the crossbows!”

“Are we being attacked?” General Mattias asked, running over without Halima, his guards behind him.

“Not by people,” Frode told him, swiftly pulling up his fishing line. “But the sea hides many things, twisted and hideous, full of sharp teeth and treacherous claws.”

“Is that true?” Elsa asked Captain Jens, who had hurried over to her and Anna and cut a dashing but strained bow.

“Depends on what you consider hideous, I suppose, but sharks have teeth and crabs have claws, so technically, he’s correct.” The young captain grinned gallantly, but there was fear in his eyes. “Your Majesties, might I persuade you to join Halima and take shelter in the cabins below? Now is no time to be on the deck. Whatever we’ve hit will want a fight.”

“We never back down from a fight,” Anna said.

“I do,” Olaf moaned from the railing. “Look at my arms. If I was supposed to fight, they’d be much sturdier. I’m a willow, not an oak.”

Kristoff and Sven joined the crew as the sailors scurried down the stairs into the ship and returned carrying sinister harpoons and heavy crossbows. Fearlessly, the sailors launched rowboats into the foaming waves, paddling away from the ship and searching the water for their prey.

“How can we help?” Kristoff asked, although Sven’s eyes flew wide with alarm.

Captain Jens looked at each of them in turn. “First of all, stay out of the way. The crew will attempt to strike whatever hit the boat. That should drive the beast away, and if not, we might wound it enough to weaken it.”

“But what is it?” Anna asked.

“Most likely a whale,” Captain Jens said. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to direct my crew. Frode, stay with our guests and keep them as safe as can be, if they’ll not go belowdecks.”

Frode nodded as the captain ran off. “Terrible, hungry things whales be. Why, my friend has been hunting a particularly vicious one for years, a vast white beast that hungers for the blood o’ men. The hideous things that live in the depths of the sea are consumed by rage and hunger, monsters of bristling maw and dread with sea-beating tails. Should the whale open his mouth—”

“I’ll be in the hold, trying not to become a puddle,” Olaf said, swiftly toddling off to the stairs.

“Maybe we just hit a rock?” Kristoff asked. “Rocks aren’t always terrible.”

“Or a sunken shipwreck?” Anna asked, an old sadness in her eyes.

As if in answer, the ship heaved again, the deck boards thudding and creaking as everyone struggled to stay on their feet.

“’Tis no rock, nor any shipwreck,” Frode said darkly. “’Tis a behemoth sent from the deepest fathoms who wishes only to drown us all.” He paused and stroked his beard. “Good eatin’, though, if you can manage to best such a thing.”

“I don’t like this,” Elsa said softly. “Whatever it is, this is its home. We’re the intruders here, and it seems wrong for us to—”

“Kill it, lads!” Captain Jens shouted. “Double rations for whoever gets the first shot!”

The crew in the rowboats cheered and aimed their harpoons, howling as they heaved the giant hooks into the dark, unknowable waters. The sailors still on the frigate held heavy crossbows, waiting for a beast to appear.

“I don’t like it, either,” Anna said, her face stony. “It seems cruel.”

“The sea is cruel.” Frode took a shining knife from the sheath at his belt and picked his teeth with the blade. “What you don’t kill first here will gladly kill you. The sea ain’t soft, like the land. There, you build walls and streets and buildings to protect yourself from beasts, but here in the ocean, there is no protection. You’re either faster than what wants to eat you, or

you're meaner, or you get eaten. It may not be ideal, but if'n you don't like it, why, you might as well stay on land." He shrugged. "If we live through it, whatever this is."

As the harpoons rained down, Elsa and Anna linked their arms and watched.

"They said this part of the sea was safe," Anna murmured.

"I guess we know better than anyone that almost anything can suddenly turn dangerous." Elsa leaned over, looking down at the roiling water.

"I got it!" one of the sailors called.

When the sisters looked over, they saw his line had gone taut, pulling the rowboat along. But the beast didn't swim away from the ship; it pulled the rowboat directly into the side, causing the wood to shudder yet again.

"Your Majesties, your safety is of the utmost importance," Captain Jens said urgently, now looking far more worried than a seasoned captain should. "Please seek shelter, I beg you. This part of the process can be messy and dangerous."

"I agree," General Mattias said. "Halima is already in the captain's quarters, where everything is nailed down. I can't keep you safe if you remain on deck." He put his hand on his sword. "Whatever is under the boat, my crew and I can fight it. Our utmost duty is to keep you safe."

"You should go," Elsa said, taking Anna's hands.

"I'm staying with you," Anna told her sister, squeezing her hands.

"I go where Anna goes." Kristoff turned and slung an arm around his reindeer friend's neck. "But you should go shelter with Halima, Sven. It's probably going to get slippery up here. And even if you're an excellent swimmer"—Sven snorted his pride—"we wouldn't be able to get you back up on the deck if you fell overboard." With a honk of realization, Sven trotted toward the stairs and disappeared into the lower decks with an awkward clatter of hooves. "Whew. Okay. Now I only have to worry about one person."

Anna jerked her head toward Elsa and cleared her throat.

"I mean, I worry about Elsa," Kristoff hurried to assure her, "but if it involves nature, she seems more than capable of taking care of herself."

The ship creaked with another hit, and Captain Jens shook his head in frustration. "I can't order royalty around, but I hope you all understand the grave risk you're taking. Whales are a challenge for even the most seasoned sailor."

“So it’s a whale?” Elsa asked. “It doesn’t feel like—”

“Definitely a whale.” He nodded coolly. “They’re the biggest things in the sea, after all, and—”

Something enormous shot out of the water just beyond him—a curling, glistening white tentacle covered in suckers. It rose as tall as the highest flag of Arendelle Castle, pausing as if assessing the situation. They watched it, stunned into silence, as it shot down toward the ship like a seeking hand. Before anyone could react, before Elsa could even scream, the tentacle wrapped around Anna’s waist. Kristoff grabbed her hands, then her skirt, but the fine new cloth was torn out of his grip as the tentacle jerked her into the air.

“Anna!” Elsa shouted. She flung her fingers outward, aiming blasts of ice at the tentacle, but it was too fast. With Anna struggling in its grasp, it slipped underwater with a powerful splash.

“Careful, crew!” Captain Jens shouted. “Aim your harpoons well. Take down the beast, but don’t hit the queen!”

Kristoff immediately dove over the railing and into the water as the sailors maneuvered their rowboats to the spot where Anna had disappeared. But Elsa turned to the captain.

“That’s no whale, so what is it?” she asked him, frantic. “It doesn’t seem hungry...”

“The Kraken,” Captain Jens said, face twisted in a snarl. “And hunger it does. It’s a colossal octopus the size of an island, known for pulling ships into the deep. Should it be allowed to fully rise to the surface, it will create a whirlpool that will suck down the ship and all souls upon it.”

“So you’ve fought it before?”

He shook his head. “No one who encounters the Kraken has lived to tell the tale.”

“Then how is there a tale to tell?”

The captain looked momentarily flummoxed before taking up a harpoon and returning to the rail. “If you’ve a plan, best put it into motion. We’ve heard stories of your powers, and you may be your sister’s only hope.”

Elsa joined him at the railing right as Kristoff surfaced, sucking in a huge breath. “I can’t see her,” he called. “This thing is huge, and it’s down too deep, and there are too many arms. I can’t—”

He, too, disappeared, pulled down into the water.

Elsa looked down at her heavy traveling dress and tall boots. There wasn't time.

"No more harpoons," she warned the enraged captain. "We don't want to make it any angrier."

With a running start, she arced over the railing and dove, bracing herself for the hard slap of the freezing water. It hit her like a bad dream, salt and spray battering her as the Kraken churned the waters. But Elsa—she was made for this. She'd fought the Dark Sea, eventually made peace with it. She knew Ahtohallan like an old friend. With a huge, gasping breath and a mighty kick, she swam under the waves and opened her eyes.

Her gaze followed the sailor's taut rope down into the darkness, where the rope quivered with the mighty creature's movement. Elsa swam a few strokes before remembering—she wasn't alone here. She had an ally. With a silent plea and a beckoning motion, she called the Water Nokk to her. The sleek water horse took form, tossing its mane and twirling, glad to be with her in the churning waves. With a smile of welcome, Elsa mounted the horse's back and tangled her hands in its flowing mane, urging it downward. The Water Nokk happily swam, whinnying its joy.

Flashes of movement disturbed the murk. There, a white tentacle waved. There, a flash of gold—Kristoff's hair. Elsa nudged the Water Spirit with her knees, and it galloped toward where Kristoff fought the tentacle, trying to push his way out of the muscular curl of pale flesh. Elsa took aim and unleashed a volley of ice at the tentacle, below Kristoff so he wouldn't be struck. The Kraken's tentacle jerked open and retreated as if in pain, releasing Kristoff, who gave a mighty kick toward the surface. As he swam upward, cheeks round with held breath, Elsa continued to battle the tentacle, distracting it from reclaiming its catch. Once Kristoff surfaced, Elsa watched from far below as sailors pulled him into their boat.

Now that Kristoff was safe, she had to be quick.

Not only would Anna be out of air soon, but if Elsa didn't save her, courageous Kristoff would dive right back down to fight for his love, a fight he couldn't win on his own.

But for all of Elsa's powers, she still couldn't breathe underwater. She could last a long time when riding the Water Nokk because of how quickly they could surface, but she wasn't indomitable. She swiftly asked the Water Spirit to swim upward, where she broke the surface and sucked in a breath.

“Is she okay?” Kristoff asked her, soaked and shivering as he peered down from the rowboat, where the sailors held him back by his shoulders.

“She will be. Stay here.” Elsa inflated her lungs and dove back underwater, urging the Water Nokk downward with all its speed and power.

Seen from far below the surface, the Kraken was more enormous than Elsa ever could’ve believed, a mass of heaving white skin that shivered with lavender and gray speckles as it moved in the darkness, its colors seeming to shift and shimmer like a butterfly in the sunlight. She hunted for a sign of Anna against the deep greenish black before catching a flash of something red billowing—Anna’s hair.

Anna wasn’t moving; she looked like a doll waved in the reckless hand of a child.

With renewed determination, Elsa urged the Water Nokk to dive deeper and deeper still. The pressure pushed all around Elsa, a headache beginning to build behind her eyes. She hadn’t been this deep underwater since she’d first faced the Dark Sea. Her fingers tightened in the Water Spirit’s mane as they approached the Kraken. Elsa couldn’t find anything about the beast that was familiar or friendly, no face or eyes or even a body; it seemed to be all tentacles, a swarming, curling mass of suckers probing and churning in darkness as thick as ink. She could sense its turmoil, though—curiosity and hurt and an ancient, innocent anger at the alien ship that had struck its tender head. It held Anna close to its center, where all its tentacles originated, and one great, round eye opened to regard Elsa with a flat black pupil the size of the fountain in the town square back home.

Once she was close enough that she was completely certain of her aim, Elsa unwrapped her hands from the Water Nokk’s mane and used both of her arms to throw a massive burst of ice water at the Kraken’s tentacle, just under where it held Anna. As the sharp, sheeting daggers of ice slammed into the tender flesh, the eye squeezed shut in pain and the tentacle uncurled, pulled back into the nest of writhing appendages. Elsa fought the desperate instinct to call out to her sister, knowing she needed every bit of air in her body. Urging the Water Spirit forward, she leaned into the flow of water and stretched out her hand.

The moment her fingertips brushed the wet velvet of Anna’s dress, relief flowed through Elsa. She pulled the fabric close, and Anna floated, unconscious and listless, toward her. With a sharp jerk, the Water Nokk

spun around, reared with an echoing call, and galloped straight up toward the surface so very far above.

Elsa wanted to cradle her sister's body to her chest and weep. She wanted to beg Anna to open her eyes, to move, to do anything reassuring, but she knew their best bet was to get her sister out of the water as quickly as possible. She clutched the wad of Anna's skirts so hard that her fist began to go numb and focused her prayers on the nearest sunlight dappling the shifting waters above. Anna billowed behind them, her hair trailing in the water like a paintbrush.

Come on, Elsa thought, her knees pressing against the Water Spirit's sides. Run like you've never run before.

The Water Nokk, as if hearing her plea, put on an extra burst of speed, and Elsa's head and ribs ached with pressure as she began to go dizzy from lack of air. They were so close. So close—

Finally the Water Spirit's nose broke the surface, and Elsa pushed up from its back and clawed her way past the waves with one hand, so desperate to taste sweet air that she all but forgot her powers. The moment her head was above the water, she sucked in a huge, burning breath, even as she pulled her sister up to the surface. Kristoff was there, and he and the sailors lifted Anna into the rowboat. Elsa clung to the side of the boat, watching as they laid her beloved sister on her side and smacked her back, trying to get the water out.

"She was under a long time," one of the sailors said apologetically.

"Not too long," Kristoff said fiercely. "It wasn't too long."

Elsa's body was numb, her feet limply kicking. The Water Nokk floated beside her, mane spread out in the water.

The men turned Anna over, trying to force the water out of her lungs as Kristoff watched, feeling helpless, his heart in his eyes. "Let me have her," he said, laying her down on the bottom of the rowboat as he pressed his mouth to Anna's blue-tinged lips.

Kristoff tried as hard as he could to bring Anna back to him, forcing breath after breath into her.

For a long moment, nothing happened, but then Anna spat out the water she'd inhaled before drawing a surprised gulp of air.

"Anna!" Kristoff pulled her into a bear hug, her hands curling around his middle.

“Hey, hey, I’m okay,” she said with a shaky laugh. “A little wet and cold, though. Where’s Elsa?”

“I’m here, Anna.” Elsa reached out a hand, and Anna grasped it.

“I’m guessing you saved me?”

“It was a group mission,” Elsa admitted, gesturing to all the sailors and Kristoff, as well as the Water Nokk. “Are you hurt?”

“A little achy, and I don’t think I’ll want to go swimming for a while. It’s cold down there! Do we have a blanket anywhere?”

One of the sailors in another boat held his hand out to Elsa. “If you’ll come aboard, milady, we’ll get you all back onto the ship and into the captain’s quarters for blankets and hot drinks. Then we can take the beast down.”

“Aye!” the sailors shouted, raising their fists.

Elsa swam over to the other boat, her wet skirts dragging her down and her chest aching from having held her breath so long. A hot drink and dry clothes sounded like the fondest dream she’d ever had. The sailors reached down and helped her into the boat, and she sat on the middle seat and pushed her sopping hair out of her face. She wanted to be in the other boat with Anna, but it was clearly already too full. As soon as she was settled, the sailors began rowing back toward the frigate, where Captain Jens and General Mattias waited at the top of the rope ladder to help them back aboard.

Several rowboats still floated near where the Kraken lurked, including the one with the rope tied tight to a ring, the attached harpoon sunk deep into the creature far below. The sailors in those boats held their own harpoons at the ready, waiting for the royals of Arendelle to find safety on the bigger ship, their eyes sparking with whatever cruel rage came over those who hunted frightening beasts and knew their impossible quarry to be near.

The water stirred gently, the tip of a tentacle breaching the surface as if hunting for something it had lost, and the sailors raised their harpoons and shouted warnings. Now that Anna and Kristoff were safe and Elsa’s fear and urgency were ebbing away, she could sense the disquiet of the massive creature below. It wasn’t angry, it wasn’t hungry. It was hurt and confused, its body pulsing with pain where the harpoon was stuck.

“We can’t leave it,” Elsa said, to herself and to the Water Spirit paddling in the sea beside her rowboat. “It doesn’t deserve this.”

The Water Nokk tossed its mane and bugled an agreement, pawing at the waves and knocking the side of the rowboat with a hoof.

“Control that beast afore we’re back in the drink!” one of the men barked.

Elsa looked to where Anna was climbing up the rope ladder with Kristoff just behind, helping her navigate the wet, twisting rope as it banged against the side of the ship. Once they were both on the deck, General Mattias beckoned to Elsa, shouting, “Please, Your Highness! I can’t protect you when you’re in the middle of the ocean! The danger isn’t over! The men still need to kill the monster!”

But Elsa looked back to the Water Spirit.

“No, the danger isn’t over,” she said.

Before anyone could stop her, she stood and dove back under the waves.

This time, she was ready for the brisk bite of the sea and the salt stinging her eyes. The Water Nokk whinnied joyously and swam under her, its confident swiftness a relief to her exhausted body. Again tangling her fingers in the Water Spirit’s mane, calmer this time, Elsa let the horse take her where they both knew they needed to be.

With her loved ones safe, it was just Elsa in her element, accompanied by a spirit that seemed to understand her, that almost read her mind as they worked in tune. She wasn’t frantic, filled with terror for her sister. Now she could look about with curiosity, note the silvery shoal of fish flashing in a patch of sun and the stark, jagged wood of an old shipwreck jutting out of the murk. As the Water Nokk took her deeper and deeper, she noticed they were following the line of rope tied to the rowboat above, pulled so taut that even the current couldn’t move it.

As the Kraken came into view, Elsa saw its large, flat eye watching her in return, an alien presence that still carried its own curiosity. A tentacle rose, slow and careful, and the Water Spirit slowed and hung suspended in the water as the Kraken held out its appendage like a shy stranger waiting to make friends.

Elsa was a little scared, but then again, she’d once been scared of Bruni and Gale and the Earth Giants, and now they were like fond cousins. Slowly, carefully, she reached out and grasped the curled tip of the Kraken’s tentacle, feeling its restrained energy in the daintiness of its response.

This Kraken the sailors feared—it was still a being like any other, at turns inquisitive and defensive. The tentacle gently tugged, and Elsa pushed

off the Water Nokk and allowed the Kraken to pull her toward it. With her other hand, she prepared to hurl ice if needed, but something told her that wouldn't be necessary.

The moment she saw it, she flinched.

The sailor's harpoon was stuck deep in the Kraken's tender flesh.

For all the creature's mass and might, it didn't know how to fight off this supremely human affliction. Releasing the Kraken's tentacle, she swam to its side and grasped the harpoon, but it was pulled too taut from above. With a grunt of frustration, she created a sharp ice shard and used it to saw away at the rope until finally the tension broke and the length went slack and floated harmlessly in the shifting green. The Kraken seemed, somehow, to relax, and she almost imagined it sighing in relief.

Now that it was free of the rope, Elsa grasped the harpoon and worked it back and forth, gingerly pulling the metal barb from the Kraken's rubbery flesh. Under her ministrations, the creature's skin shimmered with angry reds and purples as if expressing its pain. She stopped tugging and briefly put a hand to its surface, patting it as if reassuring a frightened dog. When she finally pulled the hook free, the Kraken's skin shivered with glittering pinks, as if the creature was smiling with rosy cheeks.

Elsa dropped the harpoon, watching it float uselessly down to the unseen depths. The Kraken's tentacle again appeared, sweetly brushing across her cheek in thanks. Elsa reached out to touch it in return.

I'm sorry, she thought, hoping the creature might understand.

The tentacle softly moved to her boots, positioning itself underneath her and then pushing her through the water at a speed she found both exciting and terrifying. She'd been so focused on solving this riddle that she'd gone too long without air, but the Kraken seemed to understand her plight and was propelling her to the surface with enormous speed. Of course, it didn't fully understand physics, and thus Elsa was sent rocketing out of the water like the dolphins she'd watched earlier, the Water Nokk leaping beside her and whinnying with fierce happiness. As she looked down from midair, watching the sailors gape, Elsa threw out a hand and formed a little island of ice, landing neatly on her feet as only an ice queen could.

"Hurry, milady!" one of the sailors called. "The beast has broken free of its tether, and it'll be hungering for our blood more than ever!"

"No!"

At her harsh word, everyone looked at her, stunned.

“The Kraken won’t hurt anyone else. It is not to be hunted. This is its home, where we are the trespassers. This is not a place we claim as our own. I want this area marked on a map so that no other ship might accidentally strike the beast and end up with unnecessary loss of life.”

“But what will we put on the map?” a sailor asked.

“Say that it is off-limits, per the queen of Arendelle,” Anna told him. “That should be enough.”

Smiling her appreciation of her sister’s understanding and support, Elsa said, “Now put away your harpoons, and let’s give the poor thing a wide berth.”

When the sailors didn’t immediately respond, she sent a stream of water behind her little island, pushing it over to the ship’s side. Before beginning her climb up to the railing, she reached out for the Water Nokk, stroking its nose in thanks. The rope ladder scratched her hands, but soon Kristoff and General Mattias were pulling her up onto the deck. Finally she stood on the wooden boards, dripping and surrounded by her family.

“With all due respect, Your Highness, we should kill it,” Captain Jens said. “It’s dangerous.”

“If you don’t understand something, it will always seem dangerous. I know that better than anyone. But I comprehend the Kraken better now. It didn’t come here for a fight. This is its world, not ours. There’s so much out there that we don’t know about. It deserves to live its life just as much as we do.”

“I don’t like it—” Captain Jens began.

“But the queen of Arendelle does,” Anna reminded him.

“But aren’t you angry, Your Majesty? Don’t you want revenge? It almost killed you!”

Anna reached for Elsa’s hands. “My sister is right. Things are only dangerous when we don’t understand them. It didn’t hurt me; it was trying to understand me. And luckily, Elsa knew exactly what to do.”

Frode hurried over with two blankets, rough but clean, and the sisters wrapped themselves up and took the hot tea Halima brought up from belowdecks. As they sailed away, the old sea dogs shaken and the young sailors still telling tales that would only grow with time, Anna went to the front of the ship with Kristoff to wait for Liljeby to appear on the horizon. But Elsa turned back to gaze at the sea behind them, their fight with the Kraken unmarked, just another empty swatch of lonely water. As she

watched the white foam trail behind the frigate, a lone tentacle, shimmering white, emerged from the emerald-green sea as if waving goodbye.

Elsa smiled and waved back.

*A Midsummer's
Song and
Dance*

By Lou Anders



General Destin Mattias had a problem. To be fair, it wasn't as big a problem as being trapped on the wrong side of an invisible magical wall of mist for thirty-four years. But right at the moment, sitting on a dock in Arendelle's harbor, it felt every bit as impenetrable, as insurmountable, as...

"Hopeless," said Olaf. "That's exactly how you look right now." The snowman plopped down on the dock next to the general. "I'm very good at reading faces," he explained proudly. "Your face is doing a sort of everything-is-hopeless-and-things-couldn't-be-any-worse expression."

Mattias sighed and hung his head.

"Is it that obvious?"

Olaf nodded. "Don't worry," he said. "I've observed that problems around here usually resolve if you sing and dance about them."

"That's just it," said Mattias. "I can't dance."

"That's silly," said Olaf. "*Everybody* can dance."

"Everybody but *me*," said Mattias. When the snowman raised his eyebrows, he continued. "I never had time to learn. I was too busy surviving in the Enchanted Forest. I had my soldiers to look after."

"I see," said Olaf. He considered this further and exclaimed, "But that means you can't dance at the midsummer festival!"

"Exactly."

"But won't Halima expect you to dance with her?"

"Exactly."

"Oh," said Olaf. "I'd feel hopeless too if after waiting thirty-four years to rekindle a romance with the love of my life I disappointed her on a special occasion with everyone watching."

Olaf was attempting to be sympathetic. Unfortunately, the snowman had a habit of stating the obvious in a way that sometimes lacked tact. The general was used to how Olaf spoke, but even so, he hung his head lower than before. Olaf realized he wasn't making things better and tried to be helpful.

"But couldn't you *learn* to dance?" he suggested.

“I’ve tried,” said Mattias. “The problem is that I’ve got two left feet.” Olaf had never heard of such a thing.

“Really? That’s incredible!” he exclaimed. “I didn’t know it was possible.” He peered in wonder at Mattias’s legs where they dangled over the docks. Then a new thought occurred to him. “Do I have two left feet, too?”

The snowman looked down. He couldn’t see his own feet very well, so he leapt a little distance into the air. His snowballs all detached from one another, and he brought his feet to the front where he could see them. For an instant, they were just two little round orbs floating free. Then Olaf reassembled and landed in one piece on the dock.

“It’s disconcertingly hard to tell my feet apart,” he said in a flat voice. “I see that I don’t have any toes. Perhaps I should speak to Elsa about that.”

Then Olaf brightened.

The left snowfoot rolled over to bump against its companion.

“Now I’ve got two *right* feet,” he said with a giggle. However, having both feet to one side made him unbalanced. He tipped over to prevent himself from falling, but he swayed anyway and spun around to pitch toward the water instead. General Mattias reached out quickly and caught Olaf, saving him from a splash. The snowman smiled and then frowned.

“But it’s *your* feet that’re the problem. Fortunately for you, I’m very good at fixing problems. If only we could swap your feet out with new ones.”

Mattias looked back at the village, and then his gaze turned to the mountains and the waterfall that spilled down into the sea.

“You know, there used to be a local legend, back when King Runeard first started construction on Arendelle Castle. About a song that people heard in the mountains that made them dance. I could use a little of that song now.”

“That’s silly,” said Olaf. “We don’t need a story from ancient days. We need a real-life solution.”

The snowman removed one of his arms and used it to tap his head.

“Think-think-think,” he said. “Since we can’t swap your feet out, we’ll just have to find you the right dance instructor.”

“A dance instructor?” said Mattias, who wasn’t sure he liked where the conversation was going.

“I’m sure in all of Arendelle, there’s someone who knows a dance that works with two left feet.”

“No, Olaf, two left feet—it’s an expression,” replied Mattias, but the snowman was already bounding across the village square toward the houses, imbued with new purpose.

The general sighed again.

“What am I getting myself into?” he wondered. “A dance instructor! Ha!” He turned his gaze back to the mountains. There *had* been a story. The talk of magical music had displeased King Runeard, so he took several of his officers to investigate. Mattias was a young officer candidate then and not even a lieutenant, so he wasn’t selected for the mission. When Runeard came back, the king announced that they hadn’t found anything. But no one heard the music after that. Olaf was right. It was better to keep your feet on the ground, deal with matters in real life.

Rising, Mattias shook himself off. He headed back toward Arendelle Castle. He had things to do. Always a pragmatic man who put the needs of the kingdom first, he tried to shove his concern down deep inside himself where it wouldn’t get in the way of his duty. After all, he had an important meeting with Queen Anna.



Sven the reindeer had just begun to enjoy a bowl of herbs and moss. It had a pleasing garnish of lichens and fungi, which added flavor and made it nicely crunchy.

Suddenly Olaf burst into his stable.

“Sven,” cried the snowman, “I need your help on a matter of utmost importance!”

The reindeer lifted his head in a start, accidentally tossing his vegetation into the air. The bowl rose and fell with a crash. Bits of his meal landed all over the ground.

The reindeer widened his eyes in alarm. Together with Anna, Elsa, Kristoff, and Olaf, Sven had already climbed the North Mountain and braved the Enchanted Forest, confronted angry snowmen and capricious elemental spirits, outrun Earth Giants, and faced countless other dangers. Whatever Olaf needed, the bravest reindeer of them all was ready for it.

“General Mattias can’t dance!” the snowman exclaimed.

Sven's eyes narrowed as if he'd been expecting something more urgent. Then the reindeer looked around the floor where the remains of his lunch were scattered. All wasted now. His big lips huffed a puff of air in frustration.

"No, this is serious, I promise," said Olaf.

Sven gave Olaf a skeptical look.

"It is," Olaf insisted. "I know. I am an expert when it comes to affairs of the heart."

Sven's skeptical look deepened.

"If Mattias can't dance with Halima at the midsummer festival," explained Olaf, "then he'll disappoint his one true love."

That got Sven's attention, and the reindeer forgot all about his food. The snowman wasn't the only expert in affairs of the heart. After all, it had been Sven who had helped a fumbling, insecure Kristoff propose to Anna. And look how well that had turned out. Clearly, something needed to be done here. Something that called for two experts in human romance. But what?

Olaf raced out of the door, and Sven trotted after him.

"We've got to find the best dance instructor in Arendelle," the snowman explained.

Sven nodded. That made sense.

"One who knows a dance that works with two left feet," said Olaf.

That made less sense. However, Olaf was already heading across the courtyard toward the castle bridge, so Sven scooped him up in his antlers, and together they raced toward Market Square and help!



Mattias met Queen Anna in the courtyard of the castle. He had a lot of important ideas concerning security for the upcoming midsummer festival. Arendelle had faced its share of threats, and while things had been quiet of late, one could never be too careful. Sometimes quiet times were just the calm before a storm. It was always good to be prepared. The two of them strode across the flagstones while Mattias detailed his plans.

"We will have guards in each corner of the square," he explained.

"Very good," said Anna.

"That's in addition to the ones on the walls."

"Of course," said Anna.

“And I could put a man in the clock tower.”

“If you really think it’s necessary,” said Anna.

“To keep watch over the town itself from that vantage point. And of course, we’ll patrol the outer walls.”

Anna stopped walking and laid a hand on the general’s arm.

“General, we’re allied with Vesterland. Elsa is our bridge to the spirits in the Enchanted Forest. We’ve made peace with the pirates. Arendelle is on good terms with Zaria, Chatho, and Vakretta. Even Weselton has been behaving. I appreciate all you and your soldiers do for me, for Arendelle, but it’s the midsummer festival. Don’t your soldiers need a break as well? Midsummer is a time to relax, to enjoy yourself, to get your knees up, as they say.”

“Knees up?” said Mattias.

“You know,” said Anna, lifting her feet enthusiastically. “Dancing.”

Mattias turned his face away and swallowed.

“Now that I think about it,” he said, “maybe I could take the post up in the clock tower myself.”

“General,” said Anna. “Mattias,” she added, using his name to make sure she had his attention. “Is there a reason you don’t *want* to be at the midsummer festival?”

“No, why would you say that?” stammered Mattias. “Why wouldn’t someone want to be there? It’s a very important tradition. At least I think it is. One which I’ve not been a part of in decades, being trapped in an Enchanted Forest, not being here to partake, to learn, to...” His voice trailed off.

“Right,” said Anna. “I understand. You’ve missed a lot. You need to make up for lost time. Not hide up in the clock tower away from us all. You and your staff deserve to enjoy the festival, too.” She held up a hand before the general could object. “You could implement a rotation, let your soldiers join the festival in shifts. Doesn’t Halima need a date for the big dance?”

“Yes, she does,” said the general. For a second, he let his military bearing drop, and his shoulders slumped. “One who can actually dance.” Then Mattias remembered himself and stood up very straight, hardly breathing. *Oops. Did I say that? I didn’t say that,* he thought.

“Oh,” said Anna. She had a quick mind and realized instantly what this was about. “I’m sure Halima will understand. When you like someone, you

like them for who they are inside. Little things like this aren't important. And I know Halima thinks you're wonderful."

"That's just it. She waited for me all those years. What if I'm not as wonderful as she thinks I am?"

"That's not possible."

"If you say so," said Mattias, but he didn't seem convinced.

"I do say so. I say that as your queen... and as your friend."

"Dance instructors incoming!" Olaf's shout rang out across the courtyard, frightening a pair of rock pigeons into the air.

Mattias and Anna turned in unison. In marched Sven, with Olaf riding between his antlers. Both reindeer and snowman puffed their chests out proudly. They appeared very pleased with themselves. Behind them came a procession of villagers.

"Olaf, what is this?" asked Anna.

"Oh, hi, Anna. Mattias told me that he can't dance because he has two left feet. So I rounded up a troop of villagers. They each have a different dance to teach him. I'm sure one of them will work no matter what kind of feet you have!"

Anna looked bemused and impressed, and Mattias looked skeptical, but a determined snowman was not someone who could easily be deterred.

"Instructors, present!" shouted Olaf. He and Sven snapped to attention as the villagers came forward. Olaf marched down the line as if Mattias weren't the only general present. He pulled off one of his arms and used it as a pointing stick. "Mrs. Blodget is here to teach a traditional country dance," the snowman explained. Beside him, Mrs. Blodget curtsied politely. But when Olaf snapped his fingers on his disembodied hand, she leapt back to attention.

"Anders knows a polka," Olaf continued, indicating the fish merchant, who bowed. "Persi and Aggie will demonstrate a waltz. Noa and Maja have a hora, a traditional wedding dance, in case anyone is feeling matrimonial." Olaf brought a hand to his mouth and whispered much too loudly, "I don't think that's going to come up, but it's *all they know*." Then he continued in a normal tone of voice. "Tilda and Niels have a mazurka. And Oaken will demonstrate a stick dance."

The owner of Wandering Oaken's Trading Post and Sauna stepped forward.

“Ja, it can be done with sticks or canes, but I find it’s always better with swords!”

Oaken produced two blades from somewhere behind himself and waved them about in the air. Several villagers jumped back quickly, and Olaf’s head bounced above his torso, sparing him an accidental decapitation.

General Mattias held out his hands placatingly.

“This really isn’t necessary. Especially not the swords.” He turned to Anna. “Your Majesty, please explain to them that we have important business to discuss.”

“Actually,” said Anna with a giggle, “I think we were about done. I need to go supervise the dessert selection, starting with the chocolates.” She turned toward the castle doors.

“Please...” said Mattias. But Anna was already halfway across the courtyard.

“Have fun,” she called back over a shoulder. “That’s an order. But do try to remember what I told you.”

Mattias nodded, turning back to Olaf and his companions.

“Go easy on me,” he said.

“Easy?” said Oaken. “You know the saying: ‘A good anvil does not fear the hammer.’”

Mattias looked at the wall of determined faces—young, old, furry, and frozen.

He thought he saw a lot of hammers in their eyes.

“Wonderful,” he said with a gulp.



“They say that things are supposed to look fonder in hindsight,” said Olaf. “But looking back on yesterday, I’m not so sure that’s true. I’m still surprised by how badly everything went.”

Sven nodded sadly. The villagers’ attempts to teach Mattias their dances had not gone as expected. In fact, it had nearly resulted in the general slicing off his own feet. Oaken’s sword dancing was definitely not for beginners. Or maybe for anyone but Oaken. The other dances hadn’t been as potentially life-threatening, but they hadn’t worked well, either.

The snowman and the reindeer were trudging through the Enchanted Forest. Having exhausted all potential dance instructors in Arendelle, Olaf

had decided to widen their search. If Arendellian dances didn't account for two left feet, maybe someone somewhere else knew a dance that would. The trolls of the Valley of the Living Rock had been enthusiastic, but even Olaf could tell that their own dance moves involved too much rocking and rolling for a person who wasn't made of stone to safely master. The midsummer festival was just days away, and they were running out of time.

Olaf rarely felt down for long, but he cared about his friends. Because of this, he was so preoccupied with concern that it took him a moment to realize he was humming. Beside him, Sven had changed his steps from a trot to a rather merry canter. Olaf looked at the reindeer's hooves. There was something about the way Sven was moving that had an odd rhythm to it. Step-step-jump. Step-step-jump. It was funny. Then Olaf heard something. A faint sound, carried on the summer breeze.

"Is that music?" he asked.

Beside him, the reindeer's fuzzy ears twitched.

It *was* music.

It seemed to grow louder as they listened to it, as if the notes appreciated their attention and became more confident with an audience. The music grew stronger still.

It was such a jolly, jaunty, happy tune that Olaf couldn't help feeling elated.

He saw it was affecting his companion beside him as well.

The reindeer's canter had changed. He was bouncing, stamping his hooves. Swinging in time with the notes.

"Sven!" exclaimed Olaf, "You're... dancing!"

The reindeer's face lit with surprise as he realized this as well. He stopped moving suddenly, but then his feet began to twitch on their own.

Embarrassed, Sven pulled all four hooves together in a tight bunch from the knees down.

But his furry back end betrayed him. His reindeer rump started swaying to the music.

Then his hooves all jumped at once.

It was clear Sven couldn't help himself. In fact, the reindeer began to pirouette.

Olaf considered his friend for a moment.

"Sven is dancing," he said. "And Sven has two left feet. He has two *right* feet as well, but that's not really pertinent to the situation."

Olaf grabbed Sven by the muzzle to steady him, but the reindeer couldn't stop and instead Olaf was swept into the air as Sven twirled in circles.

"We've been searching for the right dance," the snowman explained. "But it's not the dance, it's the *music*. Just like in Mattias's story. And this music works with two left feet. We've got to find it and bring it back to Arendelle." He bounced onto the reindeer's back. "Follow the music, Sven! Follow the music!"

Sven understood. The reindeer took off in the direction of the sound. Or rather, he tried to. He was attempting to gallop in a straight line, but his newfound fancy footwork was taking him all over the place. Sven swayed and glissaded back and forth across the hills and glades of the Enchanted Forest. He two-stepped, he four-stepped, he sashayed. At one point, when his hooves had a very different idea about direction than his head, Sven even bit a branch of a tree to pull himself along.

But slipping and sliding, stepping and shuffling, whisking and tangoing, reindeer and snowman gradually made progress.

The music grew louder as they followed it, until it was a full, resonant sound. It filled the woods and shook the leaves of the cottonwood trees. And along with the music there was another noise, the sound of water.

That was when they saw it.

A huge, roaring waterfall of clear spring water. It spilled down a tall cliff and collected in a mirror-bright little pool.

Standing on a rock amid the spray was a very handsome and impeccably dressed young man. He had long flowing hair and clothes the color of the water. The man had his eyes half-closed in intense concentration, for he was playing a hardingfele. The fingers of his left hand flew across the fiddle's strings, while his right hand moved the bow furiously.

"Delightful," said Olaf. He tipped forward into the music as if he were falling into the scent of the most fragrant flowers he'd ever smelled. Beside him, Sven was involuntarily cavorting in circles.

The young man's eyes opened fully. They seemed to twinkle in merriment at the newcomers. But he kept playing and Sven kept dancing until the song was finished. Then the young man lowered his bow and nodded.

"Hei, hei," said the strange fiddler. "Good day to you fine folk. What brings you to my waterfall?"

Olaf approached to the edge of the pool, stopping just short of the water.

"I'm Olaf, and I like warm hugs. My distinguished companion is Sven, and he's the better half of Arendelle's ice master and deliverer. But that's not important right now. We're both experts on affairs of the heart, but we couldn't teach Mattias to dance no matter how many dance instructors we found in the village. Even if we used swords. So, you see, that's why we've followed your music, because reindeers have two left feet."

Sven shot Olaf an expression that clearly said he was appalled by how poorly the snowman had summarized their predicament. But the young man didn't seem confused.

He raised his bow to his fiddle.

"You say you followed my... music," he said playing out a quick three notes.

In response, the reindeer's feet went tap-tap-tap.

"And you say you need help getting someone to... dance."

Three more quick notes and three more tappity-tap-taps from Sven.

"If your music can make a reindeer dance," said Olaf, "then it should be able to help a general."

"Oh, I can make anybody dance," said the fiddler. "I can make *everybody* dance."

He played a few complete bars, and Sven began to dance automatically. Olaf watched the reindeer move. When he turned back to the pool, the fiddler was right next to him, so close their noses almost touched. Though how the stranger had gotten from the rock in the center of the water to the shore without getting wet was a mystery.

"That's not disconcerting," said Olaf. He tapped his chin. "Come to think of it, a strange and very well-dressed gentleman I've never met before, out here all alone in a forest playing a fiddle in a waterfall without getting wet, who is immediately willing to help us with our problems should seem suspicious." The snowman shrugged. "But I'm willing to ignore all that because it's so coincidentally convenient." He looked at Sven, who nodded agreement.

"Will you come to Arendelle Castle for the midsummer festival and play a song so that Mattias can dance with Halima?" he asked the fiddler.

"I haven't been to Arendelle in a long time," said the fiddler. "A very long time. I need to ensure I'm truly welcome. You'll have to invite me in."

You must meet me at the castle gates and invite me in personally. By name.”

“But you haven’t told me your name,” Olaf pointed out.

“Ah,” said the fiddler. “So I haven’t. Well, you can call me Grim.”

“That sounds forbidding.”

“Does it?” said the fiddler. “Then, instead, you may call me Fosse.”

“Grim.. Fosse,” said Olaf.

“Just meet me at the gate on the day of the festival,” said Fosse, “and invite me in. If you do as I’ve asked, I’ll make sure your General Mattias dances. Have no fear of that! Fear anything else you want, but have no fear of that!”



“There you are, Destin,” said Halima.

Mattias turned around as the love of his life clutched at his sleeve.

“I haven’t seen you all day,” Halima continued. “If I didn’t know better, I’d almost think you were avoiding me.”

“Me? What? Avoiding you?” replied Mattias. “No. Not at all. I’ve just had general things to do. I mean, not as in ‘things in general,’ I mean ‘being a general’ things. For the safety of Arendelle.”

“Uh-huh,” said Halima, drawing the sound out and giving him a hard stare. Then she smiled. “Don’t worry. I know you have a lot of responsibilities. You do what you need to today, and I’ll see you for the first dance when the festival starts.”

“About that,” began Mattias. “You know I’m not... I mean, I can’t...” His voice trailed off. Mattias wanted to tell her the truth, but he was afraid and embarrassed. Why was it that he would rather face a dozen angry Earth Giants than risk disappointing this one woman?

“It’s okay,” said Halima. “Whatever it is, you can tell me, Destin. You don’t need to worry.”

Searching for the right way to say what he needed to, Mattias looked around the courtyard. He couldn’t find the words. His eyes scanned the festive floral arrangements strung along the walls and castle eaves. Through the open castle doors, he could see the banquet tables were laden with food and drinks. Opposite the castle, the gates leading to the bridge were open wide. And there were Olaf and Sven. Olaf was talking to a well-dressed

stranger carrying a musical instrument. The snowman saw the general and waved. Then he came bounding over, reindeer and musician in tow.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” said Halima, and she stepped away to go help with the decorating. Mattias was ashamed that he felt so much relief at being interrupted.

“Good news, General,” said Olaf. “Sven and I have solved your problem.”

“You have?” said Mattias. “But the festival starts soon. I don’t think I’ve got time to learn a new dance.”

“Oh, you won’t have to learn anything,” said the snowman. He gestured to the stranger behind him. “This is Fosse.”

Mattias looked at the young man. He saw that the instrument the stranger carried was a hardingfele. The traditional stringed instrument was different from other fiddles in that it had twice the number of strings. The four strings on top were played with the bow, while the remaining strings, called understrings, would resonate when the strings above were played. This made for a rich, full sound.

“That’s a fine-looking instrument,” said Mattias.

“One that I look forward to playing for you,” said Fosse. He executed a polite bow, but Mattias thought there was something smug in this face. Something about the stranger and his fiddle seemed familiar, but Mattias was sure he’d never seen him before.

“Fosse is going to join the musicians on the stage,” Olaf explained. Sven pointed with a hoof to where a small wooden platform had been set up under an awning for a group of musicians to play.

“I’m sure that will be... fine,” said the general.

“And when he plays, even left feet—”

Fosse tapped Olaf across the mouth with his bow. The snowman’s eyes crossed at the unexpected interruption.

“Let’s let it be a surprise, shall we?” said the fiddler.

“Oh, a surprise!” said Olaf. “I love surprises.” Beside him, Sven nodded happily.

“I’ll leave you to it,” said the general, who cast around for one of his soldiers to give orders to. He was ready for mundane duties to take his mind off personal worries. Whatever Olaf and his friends had planned, he didn’t expect it would be of any help.



Queen Elsa arrived just as the festival was ready to begin. It was a suitably dramatic entrance. She rode the Water Nokk through the gap in the breakwater, and the Water Spirit leapt from the sea and onto the bridge. Anna greeted her at the gates to welcome her home.

Inside the castle courtyard, everyone was in good spirits. Sven had bathed, and Kristoff was looking handsome in a smart blue suit. He had reluctantly conceded that midsummer was one of the handful of occasions important enough for him to wear one. Even Olaf was sporting a tie, a bright green length of fabric decorated in pale yellow crocus flowers. It was very pretty but did little to prevent a snowman from looking out of place in the middle of summer.

Taking it all in, Mattias had to admit that his concerns had been overblown. Everything was going very smoothly. The people of Arendelle were going to have a great midsummer festival. All but one of them, anyway. His thoughts clouded when he pictured Halima and the disappointment she would surely feel when she discovered how lacking he was, unable to participate in simple, joyful traditions. The general almost wished that an emergency would crop up, something to call him away from having to—

“Destin Mattias,” said Halima, racing up to him in surprise, “you’ve begun without me!”

“Begun what?” he asked.

“Dancing,” she said.

“What are you talking about? Me? Dancing?” That didn’t make any sense. But then Mattias looked down at his feet. They were moving. Unconsciously. All by themselves.

He was dancing.

He was dancing well.

That was when he heard the music. On the stage, the fiddler known as Fosse was performing with the other musicians. There was a nyckelharpa, a seljefløyte, and a kantele, but it was the hardingfele that somehow cut through them all and resonated across the courtyard. It was a sound that wormed its way under your skin. It penetrated right to your bones—and it moved your feet!

“I am dancing!” Mattias exclaimed.

He folded his arm across his sternum and executed a quick bow.

“Madam, would you care to dance with me?”

Halima smiled and took his hand.

“My pleasure,” she said.

And like that, they were twirling across the flagstones.

Mattias laughed as he kicked up his heels.

“Look, Olaf, I’m dancing!” he called to the snowman.

“Another successful mission from romance experts Olaf and Sven,” replied Olaf. “I knew it would work!”

“What would work?” asked Mattias, but his feet swept him away across the courtyard before he could get an answer.

It was strange, actually, the way the music carried him with it. But maybe that was what it felt like to be caught up in a dance. Mattias didn’t have any experience with dancing. At any rate, the love of his life was happy. If Halima wasn’t disappointed in him, everything was right in the world. He gave himself over to the moment.

They danced through the next song. And the song after that.

In fact, everyone around them was dancing. Even those who were helping with the food. Even his soldiers on the walls and by the gate. He’d have a word with them when this was over. But something wasn’t right.

The faces that twirled past Mattias didn’t look as carefree as they had when the music had begun. Folks were looking tired, their faces worried.

Mattias twisted his neck to glance at the stage.

Fosse the fiddler was playing by himself. The other three musicians had abandoned their instruments. Mattias caught a glimpse of one of them, dancing amid the crowd.

This was strange. Worrisome.

“Halima,” he said. “I think I need to bow out at the next song. I think something’s not quite right.”

She nodded.

“I would be grateful for the break,” she said.

But when the song ended and the next began without a pause, Mattias knew something was wrong indeed; very, very wrong.

“I can’t stop dancing,” he said.

“Neither can I,” said Halima.

The couple glanced around them fearfully.

“No one can,” said Mattias.

It was true. The entire village population was caught up in the dance. Mattias saw the same look of fear and desperation in every expression.

"Follow my lead," he asked Halima when the music shifted to a waltz. As best he could, Mattias steered them toward the fiddler.

"Fosse," Mattias cried as his steps approached the stage. "I need you to stop the music."

"Stop the music? Why on earth would I do that?" said the fiddler. "I haven't played in Arendelle in decades. Since before this ugly old castle was here. I'm certainly not going to stop now that I'm back."

"Back?" called Mattias, but then something clicked into place. "It was you, all those years ago! You made the music in the mountains!"

"I just wanted people to dance to my tunes," said Fosse. "But nasty King Runeard said it slowed construction of his castle. Then he banished me. A king's word has power in his own land, and I had to stay away. Now that Olaf has invited me back in, I'm not leaving. It's the rest of you who are!"

"What do you mean?" asked Mattias, but the fiddler increased the speed of his music.

Mattias and Halima couldn't stop themselves from dancing away.

The general tried to steer his footwork to bring him near the queen, who was twirling helplessly with Kristoff.

"What's happening?" said Anna. "Why can't we stop?"

"It's the music," Mattias explained. "Your grandfather said it was just a story."

"Grandfather Runeard?" asked Anna.

Elsa drifted into their orbit.

"The fiddler," asked Elsa. "Who is he?"

"He says his name is Fosse," explained Mattias.

"Fosse?" exclaimed Elsa. "He's a fossegrim! A spirit of the waters that plays beguiling music."

"Are our people in danger?" asked Anna.

"Not if I can help it," said Elsa.

Spinning around, she stretched out her arm and sent a blast of ice shooting across the courtyard toward the fiddler. But Fosse saw it coming and leapt to the side. He glared at Elsa, and his bow zigged and zagged across the strings. She sent three more bursts of ice in rapid succession, but Fosse's music jerked her back and forth, fouling her aim. They all missed.

“There’ll be no more of that,” he called out. “That’s the sort of bad behavior that will see you thrown out of the castle. In fact, I’ll throw all of you out now!”

Fosse leapt from the stage and began to wade through the crowd. The dancers parted for him, then, frighteningly, they fell into his wake.

As the fossegrim marched across the courtyard and out the castle gates, Anna, Kristoff, Elsa, Sven, and all the villagers danced after him. It was a mad procession, but no one could resist it. Fosse led them down the bridge, across the village square, and toward the docks.

Only one person in all of Arendelle wasn’t following.

Oblivious to everyone and everything, Olaf danced alone in the middle of the castle courtyard.

“Shooby dooby dooby do do,” he sang out.

Then he slid to a stop and looked around.

“Hello? Where did everybody go? Sven? Anna? Kristoff?”

Olaf put a hand to the side of his head, where an ear might be if he had ears.

Listening, he caught the refrains of the fading fiddling.

“The party’s moved on without me? Wait for your snowman!”

Olaf ran out the gates and after the crowd.

He caught up with castle staff members Gerda and Kai, who were straggling at the back of the pack.

“We can’t stop dancing,” they explained.

“That seems serious,” said Olaf. “I’ve got to find Anna.

“Make way, snowman coming through!” he called. He put his head down and pounded his snowball feet on the pavement.

Olaf found Anna just as Fosse reached the edge of the docks.

“Why are you doing this?” called Anna to the fiddler.

“Your grandfather drove me from my home,” exclaimed Fosse, whisking his bow to point at the waterfall on the cliffs beyond the town.

“Now I’m driving you from yours. You can all take a long dance off a short pier,” he said with a laugh. “That, or you give me your word that you will all leave Arendelle forever!”

“Leave Arendelle,” said Anna. “We can’t leave Arendelle!”

The fiddler slid his bow across the strings. Anna danced right to the edge of the docks. She swayed precariously over the waters. Olaf raced to catch her, but she danced out of his grasp.

“I wonder,” said Fosse. “Can a queen swim and dance at the same time? I don’t think so.”

Midway through the crowd, Mattias was thinking furiously. He couldn’t control his feet, not when the music played. And Fosse hadn’t stopped playing. If only there was a way to make the fiddler not fiddle. Watching Olaf, he had an idea.

“Olaf!” cried Mattias. “The music doesn’t affect you.”

“It’s because I am made of magic,” explained Olaf. “And snow. Of course.”

“We have to get the fiddle away from Fosse,” Mattias said. “And I think you’re the only one who can do that!”

Olaf understood. He ran toward the fossegrim. Fosse couldn’t control him, but he had a whole village under his spell. He bowed and spun two villagers into Olaf’s path.

Olaf tried again, but Oaken loomed to block his way.

“Hello and apologies, little snow friend,” said the shopkeeper.

“I can’t get through,” yelled Olaf.

“It’s going to take strategy,” said the general. “All of us working together.”

“How can we work together when we can’t stop dancing?” asked Elsa.

That was a good question. If they couldn’t stop dancing, Mattias had to account for the dancing in his plan. He thought back to his recent lessons, all the various dance moves the villagers had tried and failed to teach him.

“I might not be a good dancer,” said Mattias. “But I bet I can choreograph!” He looked about for the reindeer.

He called out to Sven, twirling his fingers to indicate what he wanted. The reindeer, always quick on the uptake, understood. He pirouetted in a circle, caught Olaf with an antler, and hurled him over the wall of dancers.

Olaf landed in a run, but Fosse scowled and sent a trio of villagers to stop the snowman.

“Kristoff, you’re up!” said Mattias while gesturing instructions.

Right before the villagers reached Olaf, Kristoff leapt in their path in a deep knee bend, then flung his arms and legs akimbo. Olaf ran on. But the fiddler danced another group of people into position.

“Now, Your Majesty,” Mattias called to Anna. She caught Olaf and sent him spinning rapidly like a top.

“Wa-wa-wa-wa-wa-wah,” he cried dizzily.

“Now you, Your Other Majesty,” said Mattias to Elsa.

“Keep going, Olaf,” shouted Elsa.

With split-second timing, she conjured a ramp of ice. Olaf hit the ramp and slid up it, launching into the air and over the villagers’ heads.

The snowman crashed into Fosse. They tumbled in a jumble of limbs, not all of them attached. Olaf’s arms had come off, but they still clutched at the hardingfele.

For a minute it was touch and go, but Fosse pulled his instrument free. He laughed and held up his fiddle in triumph. But then his eyes went wide.

Olaf’s lower half was racing away with something impaled right through the snowball.

“What good is a fiddle without a bow?” said the snowman’s head from beside the fossegrim.

It was true. While Olaf was fighting over the fiddle, the snowman’s bottom had made off with the bow. Fosse plucked at his strings with a finger, but the discordant noise had no effect.

Around them, the people of Arendelle began shaking off the spell. They turned to advance on the fiddler.

“Maybe this anvil should fear the hammers, ja?” said Oaken, smacking a meaty fist into a big palm.

Fosse spun, ready to leap into the sea. But the Water Nokk rose out of it. It stamped its foot and sent an angry spray to splash the fossegrim.

The fiddler gulped. He was surrounded by a sea of angry faces.

And then the fossegrim did something very unexpected.

He began to cry. Great, big drops like a waterfall rained from his eyes and collected in a pool at his feet.

Anna and Elsa looked at each other in bewilderment.

The sisters knew each other so well, they knew what the other was thinking.

They were meant to be the bridge between people and spirits. Not the wall.

Their grandfather might have built dams to divide, but they tore them down to bring folks together.

“I understand you were driven out of your home,” said Anna kindly.

“But things are different now,” Elsa explained. “We live in harmony with the spirits.”

“We could live that way with you, if you wanted,” said Anna.

“Provided you only make people dance when they want to,” added Mattias.

“What do you say?” said Olaf. His disembodied arm reached out a hand. “Friends?”

Sven gave an encouraging look and a fuzzy smile.
And Fosse sniffed and stopped crying.



On the stage, Fosse played with the other musicians. This time, his tune was easy to dance to, but it wasn't compulsory. Queen Anna had invited the fossegrim to reoccupy the waterfall near Arendelle. He wasn't sure if he would take her up on the offer. He had lived near the distant waterfall for decades, and it felt like home. But, as he put it, “It was nice to be welcome again.”

About half the villagers were dancing. Others had had enough footwork for a night, if not for a season. They had moved inside to help themselves to the buffet table. But a slow and pleasant waltz had tempted Anna and her friends back onto the floor.

“It doesn't matter to me if you can dance or not,” said Halima. She and Mattias were stepping and sliding near the center of the courtyard. “I like you for who you are, not who you aren't. I see you, Destin Mattias. You're a good man, and that's worth risking a few feet out of place.”

“I tried to tell him that,” said Anna, waltzing past with Kristoff.

“Listen to your queen!” Kristoff said.

“She knows what she's talking about,” agreed Halima. “Also listen to me.”

“I will,” promised Mattias.

“You know,” said Olaf, twirling by with Sven, “you're really not that bad.” The reindeer gave Mattias an approving look.

“I'm not, am I?” said the general. Whether it was a residual effect of the fossegrim, or just that his nervousness and fear were finally gone, Mattias was picking up the waltz rather quickly. “Olaf, you thought that I needed the right instructor. Then you thought I needed the right music. It turns out I just needed the right partner. And I found her.”

He turned to gaze into his love's eyes.

“Just as long as you let me lead,” said Halima.

“Oh, you got that right,” said Mattias.
And they danced long into the night.

Anna
and the King

By Lorie Langdon



Queen Anna straightened her crown and tucked an errant strand of auburn hair behind her ear. She smiled at the looking glass and lifted her chin as a wisp sprang out on the other side of her head like a twisted pumpkin vine. With an exasperated sigh, she grabbed a bobby pin from her vanity and anchored the willful wave into place.

She leaned toward the mirror, her reflection wide-eyed, her cheeks washed of color.

She straightened and stepped back, squaring her shoulders. In twenty minutes, she would address the kingdom at the opening of the harvest festival and tell the people of Arendelle that she had secured a trade deal with the Southern Isles that would generate jobs, increase wealth, and improve their access to a wider range of goods and services. She had worked with the eldest prince and heir to the throne and luckily had no interaction with the dastardly Prince Hans. Even with the possibility of encountering the man who had nearly taken everything from her, it had been worth the risk.

The trade agreement was something her father had worked toward his entire life.

And yet, her stomach felt like a snowball and her limbs like rubber. Not unlike during her first dance recital, when she had pirouetted so exuberantly that she'd knocked three children into the village fountain.

Anna rubbed the back of her neck and began to pace, remembering the year after her disastrous dance, when she had studied pianoforte with a music tutor for months in preparation for a concert that she would give for her family and all the servants in the castle. Mama had smiled and clapped along as Anna had played Arendelle's national anthem. Halfway through her fourth song, Papa had been called away on urgent business. Anna had suspected that his business involved an aching head more than any crucial matters of state. Yet that night, he had gathered her in his strong arms and assured her that she could do anything she set her mind to. He'd told her he loved her music because he loved her.

Tears stung the backs of Anna's eyes. She hadn't believed him. Mostly because she had not believed in herself. It was so much easier to see the talents and abilities of others even as she discounted her own gifts.

Anna sank into a chair by the window that overlooked the courtyard, decorated with cornstalk scarecrows and hay bales piled high with lemon-yellow gourds and plump pumpkins. Just beyond, the village bustled with activity as the people prepared for the coming festival, and to the north, the mountains rose in a brilliant conflagration of flaming trees, a brisk wind waving their leaves in a last dance to show off their gowns of fiery foliage. Farther up stood the icy crags. Anna's chest tightened with longing for her best friend and sister. She didn't see Elsa nearly as much as she would like.

Perhaps if Mama and Papa and Elsa were there, Anna would not feel so nervous about whether the people of Arendelle would embrace the new trade deal with the Southern Isles.

With a loud sigh, she leaned against the sill and pressed her forehead to the cool glass as she peered to the east, where she could just make out the reflection of the sun on the crystalline waters of the harbor.

Father had loved the sea. A stab of grief wrenched Anna's heart at the thought of him and Mama losing their lives in the treacherous waters. Anna had tried hard over the years to tame her vivid imagination and *not* envision the ship tossed like a toy on monstrous waves, splintered to ribbons, her parents clinging to each another as they were swallowed by the fathomless deep.

At least they had been together, and still were. Her soul refused to believe otherwise.

Anna smiled. If Papa could see her now, he would be so proud.

That was when it all came rushing back to her: the exact day that she had glimpsed herself through her father's eyes...



"Anna, can you play a little quieter? I need to focus on this document," King Agnarr asked his nine-year-old daughter.

Anna sat on the floor of her father's office with dolls spread around her in various poses as she acted out a drama of adventure and romance. "But, Papa, Princess Regina has just found the location of the Devil's Eye diamond, *and* it's in Prince Handsome's kingdom! She's terribly excited."

The king peered over the side of his desk and lifted an amused brow. “Prince Handsome, eh? Is that the best you can come up with?”

Anna giggled and lifted her only male doll, brushing back the strands of his golden hair as she gazed into his blue glass eyes. “But he is quite handsome.”

“Which is all well and good. But you are a princess, and you’re old enough to look for other qualities in a love interest,” Papa said with mock sternness.

Anna pressed her lips together in a half frown. In all the good fairy tales, the princes had gorgeous hair, fine eyes, and debonair charm. They *always* dressed in tailored suits befitting their station or uniforms dripping with medals. “What other qualities?” she asked.

“Well”—Papa turned to face her, resting his elbows on his knees—“your future husband should be brave and kind. He should respect your wishes and protect you with his life.”

Anna set down her doll and leaned back on her hands, listening intently. It felt so good to have Papa’s full attention that she wanted to soak up every moment. “Go on,” she encouraged.

The king tapped his chin. “He should be loyal and love you above all others.”

“Like you love Mama?” She sighed dreamily.

“Yes,” Papa answered with a decisive nod.

“Shouldn’t we also like all the same things? Like exploring nature and building snowmen and eating extra-tall sandwiches?” Anna spanned her arms to demonstrate all the meats and cheeses and pickles and delicious food that she could stuff between two slices of bread.

Papa chuckled. “Perhaps.”

He grew silent and cocked his head as he watched her. “I think, most importantly for you, he will need to have an indomitable will.”

“*Abominable*?” Anna scrunched one eye. She had heard tales of an abominable snow monster who lived high in the mountains and liked to eat children for breakfast. She shuddered.

The king laughed. “No, darling, *in-dom-i-ta-ble*. It means dauntless and strong.”

Anna folded her legs and propped her chin on her fists. “Why do you think I need someone *in-dom-it-able*?”

Papa reached out and brushed aside the strand of hair that was always falling in her eyes. “Because, dear one, you need someone who can keep up with you. Someone who will not cower in the face of your irrepressible spirit.”

Irrepressible spirit? As stubborn and willful as a mule? She’d heard similar things uttered about her ever since she could remember. Like when Mother had taught her how to speak French, and Anna had spoken the language nonstop for a month. Mama had complained that Anna’s pronunciation was atrocious, and Anna had insisted that she was creating her own unique dialect. That was when Mother had muttered something about loving her despite her inheriting her father’s bullheadedness. But Anna took pride in her perseverance. Giving up was most definitely *not* her style.

However, that trait in a future beau didn’t seem in the least romantic.

“But, Papa—”

A knock sounded on the door, and Father called for them to enter.

“Your Majesty.”

Anna turned to find the housekeeper wringing her hands in the open doorway.

“There’s been another incident... er...” The housekeeper’s gaze shifted down to Anna, then back to the king. “Princess Elsa needs you, sir.”

The king stood and rushed toward the door.

Anna hopped to her feet. “Papa, can I come, too?”

Her father glanced back. “No, Anna, not this time.”

“But I want to help!” She always wanted to help. Instead, she always seemed to be in someone’s way. She could prove that she could be helpful!

She rushed forward and grabbed Papa’s large hand. Time with her father was so rare. He was always busy running off to solve some problem or help others.

“I promise I won’t get in the way.” Papa looked down at her, and Anna stared up at him with wide eyes.

His gaze softened upon her, and a tiny smile tugged up the corner of his mouth.

Certain that she had won, Anna offered her biggest grin.

But then Papa’s brows lowered. “Not this time, darling.”

“When will you be back?” Anna asked, her lip jutting out in a pout.

“I don’t know. You should go find your mother. I’m sure she can give you something useful to do.”

Anna squeezed his hand harder, silently begging him not to go.

Carefully he tugged his fingers out of her grasp. “I must go help your sister. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Anna’s shoulders drooped as she watched him walk out the door.



Anna raced down the corridor on her bike, the breeze blowing back her hair as she broke through shafts of golden sunlight that shimmered like dancing fairies. If she made it to the kitchen in time, there might be waffles left over from breakfast.

She passed a set of open doors, the sound of melodic humming drifting through the air.

Anna swung her bike around and skidded to a halt, setting one foot on the marble floor as she stared into her mother’s sewing room. Mama sat near the hearth, chestnut hair pinned back in a messy bun as she worked knitting needles through azure-colored yarn. Anna had heard the furious clacking all the way down the hall.

Mama spent most every day making blankets and mittens and clothing for the elderly and the sick. She always said it was the best way to use her talents to care for others while the castle was shut off to visitors. A situation Anna had stopped asking questions about long ago. Sometimes Father and Mother went out. But besides their few loyal servants, no one ever came in.

Anna’s gaze darted to rolls of fabric, tissue paper patterns, scissors, and measuring tapes on a table near her mother’s elbow. There were baskets heaped full of yarn balls and a wooden rack that contained thread in every color of the rainbow. Sweaters embroidered with tiny reindeer, kissing birds, and rows of snowflakes hung on a rod, ready for delivery. Three sewing machines sat unused against the wall. Mama didn’t have as much help in her charitable efforts since they had dismissed half the servants. It seemed she would never finish all the work she had laid out for herself.

Papa had said to find something useful to do. Anna should really help Mama. She’d already lapped the first floor of the castle four times, and her stomach growled. But luncheon was more than an hour away!

Anna lifted her foot back onto the bike pedal. She could grab a waffle and bring her mother one, too. But as she started to ride, she found herself pedaling toward Mama instead of away. Visions of Mama singing her praises to Father at dinner propelled Anna into the sewing room.

“Hello, dear.” Mama beckoned. “Come in!”

Anna grinned and rode inside. Perhaps she was needed after all. She leaned her bike against the wall, ran over, and gave her mother a hug. Then she stood straight as a soldier and clicked her heels. “Princess Anna reporting for duty!”

“Duty?” her mother chuckled.

“Yes, I’m here to help. Put me to work!”

Anna didn’t miss that her mother nibbled on her top lip. It was something Mama did when she needed time to think. Anna’s heart dropped. She didn’t have the best sewing skills. But she was willing to learn. Maybe she would find that she was amazing at sewing. The best in the land!

There had to be *something* she was good at.

“I’ll listen, Mama. I promise!”

“All right.” Her mother offered a gentle smile and patted the sofa cushion. “Sit next to me and I’ll show you what to do.”

After a flurry of instructions, Anna began sewing together soft woolen fabric to create a sock.

“Make the stitches as small and close to the edges as possible. Once you’re finished, we will turn the sock inside out so those stitches will be on the inside.”

“Got it!” Anna stuck her tongue out to the side and screwed up one eye, focusing all her attention on her work. “When I’m finished, can I give these stockings to Papa?”

“There’s a slight problem with that,” Mama said pragmatically.

Anna clamped the needle between her teeth and raised the attached pieces of fabric. “Oh!” she said out of the side of her mouth. “These would never fit Papa. His feet are as big as shovels!”

Her mother’s laughter sounded like light skipping across a babbling stream.

Anna stopped to stare at her beautiful mama, praying one day she might become a tenth as lovely.

When Mama’s mirth had subsided, she wrapped an arm around Anna and squeezed her close. “You are the delight of my life, little one. But let’s

not tell your father the part about the shovels.”

“Yes, Mama,” Anna said with a contented sigh. She could’ve stayed tucked against her mother’s warm side, breathing in her powdery scent, for the rest of the day. But the socks would not sew themselves, so she set about her task with singular focus. Maybe if she finished quickly enough, Olina would make her a *fresh* waffle.

After what felt like hours, Anna finished stitching the edges of the fabric together. “Ta-da!” But when she lifted the completed sock, the blanket her mother was knitting rose with it. Realizing that she had accidentally sewn the sock to her mother’s beautiful creation, Anna shrieked and jumped to her feet. As she did, her foot caught in a loop of yarn and she tumbled to the side, knocking her mother’s sewing kit into the air.

Anna reached out to catch it too late as dozens of needles, straight pins, and bobbins of thread flew into the air, then crashed to the floor, rolling in all directions. “Oh no!”

When the cacophony of plinking sounds finally stopped, Mother frowned and shook her head.

Anna’s throat squeezed.

Mama painted on a smile and sighed. “It’s fine, dear. Just pick everything up and I’ll work on detaching your sock.”

“I’m sorry, Mama.” Anna’s shoulder’s slumped. So much for being the best seamstress in the land.

“It’s fine, dear. No harm done.”

On hands and knees, Anna crawled around the floor cleaning up the enormous mess she’d made. It was a common predicament she found herself in—making up for the chaos she seemed to create everywhere she went. Apologizing for some tangle or another.

She picked up a needle and accidentally pricked her finger. Her eyes stung as she sucked away the drop of blood. Yet it wasn’t the pain of the stick but the throb in her chest that hurt; the disappointment that she had discovered another thing she wasn’t good at.



Anna trudged down the corridor toward her bedroom. After lunch her mother had suggested that Anna take a rest. Not a *nap*, although Anna was certain that was what she’d meant. Not as a punishment, Mama had

clarified—although being banished from the sewing room felt like a direct result of her clumsy mistake.

If Anna had crafted the most beautiful sock, and *not* sewn it to her mother's blanket, and *not* knocked the sewing kit into the air and watched it explode like fireworks, Mama would still want her help.

Elsa had always been good at dancing and playing the piano and sewing. Her sister's calm and focus allowed her to master any skill she set her mind to. At least that was how she used to be. Ever since Elsa had gotten sick, Anna had not been allowed to see her. She didn't know for certain what was wrong with Elsa—Mama and Papa would never say—but what other explanation could there be?

Anna had imagined all sorts of horrid illnesses that Elsa could have: pox that covered her from head to toe in enormous welts, a virus that turned her skin purple and her hair blue, a wasting disease, the putrid throat, or the worst of the lot, *hippofanatitis*. She'd overheard a delivery boy talking about it in the courtyard one afternoon. He'd sworn that when he had spied Elsa through the window, she'd grown an enormous snout and her ears had migrated to the top of her head.

Anna shuddered at the thought.

But what was she supposed to think when her parents refused to discuss it?

It had to be something so horrendous that they didn't want to frighten Anna with the details.

Anna let out a hard sigh and stopped in front of Elsa's locked doors. At first, she'd visited her sister every day, sometimes sitting outside her room for hours or sleeping there at night. She would sing, tell stories, beg Elsa to come out even if they didn't tell their parents. She had insisted that whatever disease Elsa had, she wanted it, too.

Once, Anna had wrapped her entire body in strips of leather fabric with only tiny holes for her nose and eyes. She'd looked like a mummy and walked like one, too. Anna had figured if she covered every bit of her skin, she would not catch whatever Elsa had. She had assured Elsa that it would be safe for her to come in. Unfortunately, Papa had come along before Anna could convince Elsa to open the door.

Anna knocked three times. "Elsa? It's me, Anna."

"I know who it is," Elsa answered gravely.

Anna jumped at her sister's voice and then rushed forward, pressing her mouth to the hairline crack between the doors. "How did you know I was out here?"

"You were stomping your feet as you walked." As usual, Elsa sounded older than her twelve years.

"Was not!" Anna insisted with a pout.

"What's wrong, Anna?" Elsa asked with a long sigh.

Anna leaned her forehead against the door. "I was worried about you. Papa rushed off earlier..."

Anna heard a thump and knew Elsa was leaning against the other side. Anna could almost smell her sister's fresh scent, like crystallized vanilla and crisp winter winds.

"I'm fine," Elsa huffed.

Anna could feel her sister's frustration. It hurt, being shut out by her best friend. But she got the feeling it was out of Elsa's control. "I miss you, Elsa. You're like the peanut butter to my jelly. The ham to my cheese."

Was that a laugh Anna heard through the door?

She pressed her face to the gap. When she only heard silence, she whispered, "I'm lost without you."

"No, Anna. You're better off without me.... I would only—"

"You would only what? Elsa, talk to me!"

An icy chill permeated the wood, and Anna stepped back. Elsa must have walked away and opened a window. Anna hung her head and spoke into the silence. "At least when we were together, I could cheer you up. It was the one thing I was good at."

"What are you good at, dear one?" a deep voice asked, making Anna whirl to find her father approaching, head cocked to the side, eyes searching as he awaited her reply.

Anna supposed it wouldn't hurt to tell the truth. "I could always make Elsa happy. Make her laugh, even when she was sad."

Papa smiled but his eyes were far away as he said, "You could make a polar bear laugh, Anna." He looked at her, then, "I've come to ask if you would accompany me to the harbor. There's a bit of business I need to take care of with a merchant captain."

Anna's heart cartwheeled in her chest. "Me? You want *me* to come with you?"

Bemused, the king replied, “Yes, Anna. Your mother and I think it would do you good to get out of the castle. Would you like to come? I have a horse saddled for you.”

Anna jumped up and pumped her fist in the air. “Yes, yes, yes!”



The harbor had always felt like a magical place to Anna. She rode beside her father through the courtyard, past the castle gates, and up to a landscape of glittering blue water and crisscrossing bridges. Sailors in short pants and caps, some with ink circling their arms, bustled around the docks unloading heavy crates of cargo and piling them into wagons. Fishermen hefted buckets of fresh fish to sell at the market, and others scurried to load supplies onto a glorious ship tied to the longest pier.

The ship had three masts, with billowing white sails reaching as high as the nearest tower of the castle. The boat was enormous, larger than five cottages stacked side by side. “How many people live on such a boat, Papa?”

“That depends, but usually at least twenty. It takes a skilled crew to manage such a vessel.”

The briny air pushed Anna’s hair off her face. She breathed deeply. She’d never minded the scents of sea and fishes. “How exciting it would be to sail the open ocean and discover new lands and peoples and languages and food!” Anna sighed dreamily.

The king chuckled. “Yes, I imagine it would seem romantic to one such as you.”

Anna turned to stare at him. “What do you mean, ‘such as you’? Do you mean someone who is always getting in the way?” Her shoulders slumped. “Mama told you what happened in the sewing room.”

“Anna, I meant nothing of the sort. You are never in the way. And yes, your mother explained that you’d tried to help but had a mishap in the process. That’s why I thought it would do you good to get outside and expend some energy.”

A large man in suspenders and high boots with a wicked-looking ice pick strapped to his back stomped past, shouting, “Kristoff! Where could that boy have gotten to now?”

Anna's gaze caught on a shaggy blond head peaking up behind a stack of boxes as he stuffed a krumkake into his mouth and smeared chocolate up one side of his face. Their eyes met, and he raised a finger to his lips as if asking her not to reveal his location. Then a young reindeer stomped up beside him and nudged his shoulder with his crown of antlers. "Not now, Sven!" The boy pushed the animal away. "I'll get you another cookie, I promise."

Was this the boy the ice harvester was searching for?

Anna glanced back just as the reindeer's enormous tongue engulfed the boy's face and licked the chocolate off his cheek. "EEK!" The boy laughed and playfully slapped the reindeer away.

Anna giggled even as longing unfurled in her chest. What she wouldn't give to have such companionship.

A few moments later they reached the end of the pier, and Anna stared up and up and up into the snapping canvas sails, mesmerized by their dance. Father dismounted and then reached to help Anna down. He held her under her arms, and she placed her hands on his shoulders, eye to eye for once. "Papa, may I please go on board the ship? *Please?*" She puffed out her bottom lip and stared at him with puppy eyes.

"No, dear. It isn't safe for one as curious as yourself," Father said as he set her onto the boards of the dock. "Stay close while I speak with this gentleman, and then I'll take you to Blodget's Bakery and buy you a whole bag of rosettes."

Rosettes were her very favorite cookie: sweet batter shaped like flowers, fried, and topped with powdered sugar. Anna's mouth watered just imagining the first bite as it melted on her tongue. "Yes, Papa."

Father strode off to speak with a rotund man in a tall feathered hat, and Anna wandered over to the edge of the dock and stared out at the fjord speckled with silver shards of sunlight. The trail of sparkles led through craggy gray mountains to the open sea beyond. And to adventure.

Anna exhaled slowly.

Perhaps her destiny lay beyond the boundaries of Arendelle. What if she possessed the talent for sailing and discovery and such? How would she ever know if she didn't try?

She stared at the looming hull of the ship as it bobbed up and slapped back down in the gentle waves. The sides were carved with the shapes of blooming flowers, and blue and green scrolling designs marked the vessel

as Arendellian. She stood near the bow, and the eyes of a wooden puffin figurehead perched there watched her, inviting her to come aboard.

Anna glanced back to where Papa spoke with the captain, their heads bent in deep concentration. She had told her father she would stay nearby. It wasn't honorable to break a promise. Her feet tingled, energy coursing up her legs imploring her to move. To go!

A ramp led from the dock to the ship. Wide and sturdy, it didn't appear dangerous at all.

"Help!"

Anna's eyes jerked up to the deck of the ship.

"Stop. Help!" The voice sounded young.

Anna took several steps back and shielded her eyes as she searched for the person in distress. A boy, no older than herself, hung upside down from the mainmast, his ankle caught in a rope. Red hair hung straight down from his head, and his green eyes darted as a couple of teenage sailors poked him, cackling as they watched him swing.

Hands on her hips, Anna did her best to imitate her mother's queen voice as she demanded, "Release that boy this instant!"

The boy's tormentors whirled to face Anna. A lanky young man with braided brown hair scoffed, "And why should we do that?"

"Yeah," the round one chimed in. "We don't answer to *little girls*."

"Yeah," the lanky sailor said as he stepped toward her with a menacing frown.

"You might want to listen to her, chaps," the boy hanging upside down said. "That be the princess."

"And how would ye know that?" the shorter sailor asked as he gave the boy another shove, sending him in dizzying circles.

Even as he spun, the boy said, "'Cause I just watched her ride up next to the king, ye dimwits!"

The lanky sailor froze mid-stalk, and the round one paled even as he pulled a cutlass from his belt and swung it toward the dangling boy.

"Wait, stop!" Anna flung herself forward as the knife sliced through the rope and the redheaded boy fell to the deck with a smack.

Anna ran over and knelt beside him. "Are you okay?"

The boy lay curled on his side, and when Anna touched his arm, he glanced up with wet green eyes. "I'm fine."

Up close, Anna could see that he was younger than her by a few years. What was such a young child doing on a ship? “Are you a sailor?” she asked.

“Of a sort.”

“He ain’t no sailor,” one of the tormentors spat. “He ain’t nothing but a nuisance.”

The other bully laughed. “Only reason he’s here is ’cause he’s the quartermaster’s son and his mama don’t want him!”

The boy swallowed hard, and Anna could see he was fighting against his tears.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Ebbe,” he muttered.

“Ebbe,” Anna began. “Are you injured?”

“I don’t think... think so.” Ebbe sat up and cradled the arm he’d landed on, his chin trembling.

“Would serve the little pest right!” the lanky sailor spat.

Ebbe hung his head and whispered, “I only get in the way.”

Anna took the boy’s hand and tugged him to his feet. “My papa says that if you square your shoulders and lift your chin, you always feel stronger.”

Ebbe’s head snapped up. “The *king* says that?”

“Yep. And my mother tells me that everybody is good at something. It just takes some of us longer to find our gifts.”

The round sailor stepped forward. “The *queen* says that?”

Anna gave a nod.

The lanky young man propped his hands on his hips. “I ain’t got no talents. That’s why my ma kicked me out at seventeen. Swabbin’ decks is the only job I could find.”

“And that’s only because my pa felt sorry for you and took ye on,” Ebbe fired back, his tears replaced by anger.

The lanky sailor lunged.

Anna stepped between them and flung her hands out. “Stop! If you quit squabbling and feeling sorry for yourselves, you could help one another.”

The bickering boys stilled.

“How’s that?” Ebbe scratched his head.

“Treat others the way you wish to be treated.” Anna repeated something her mother was fond of saying.

“How’s that?” the thin one asked.

“For one,” Anna said, “if you work together, you can accomplish much more.”

“Like what?” the shorter sailor asked.

“You can do whatever you set your mind to!” Anna gestured to the magnificent ship, their vessel to the world.

“And me, too?” A teenage sailor Anna had never seen before stepped into view. Then another young man and a boy of around twelve, until Anna was surrounded by scruffy sailors.

“You’re all like Vikings of old, sailing the fjords to find treasure!” Anna cleared her suddenly dry throat and lifted her chin. “I mean, all of you have gifts and a bigger destiny.”

An adolescent with inked-up arms said, “I don’t fulfill any destiny.” His words were gruff, yet Anna could see the longing in his eyes.

Anna straightened her spine and asked, “What do you do on the ship?”

“Trim the sails and care for the rigging. Ain’t no destiny in that. Except pinched fingers and sunburn!” the tattooed sailor scoffed.

Several of the boys laughed.

“When you sail through a storm,” Anna said, projecting her voice, “do you lower the sails to keep the boat from blowing off course?”

“Yes...”

“Then you are responsible for every life on this ship.”

The young man’s eyes widened.

Anna turned as she spoke to the entire group. “Each of you brings goods to Arendelle that enrich our land. Books for education. Rice that feeds those who are less fortunate. Just last week, I heard about a cargo that brought metals used to repair a broken waterwheel that supplies fresh water to the entire village!”

Anna turned back and faced Ebbe.

“Everybody is important, and my papa says we all have a purpose.”

“She’s right,” someone with a deep voice said as the crowd parted for the king.

Immediately every sailor dropped to one knee.

Anna gaped up at her father, his green eyes shining down on her with pride.

“You should all listen to Princess Anna. She is wise beyond her years,” Papa said without taking his eyes off Anna’s face. “If you are fortunate, you

will have the gift of leadership like my daughter, and you can inspire others to be part of something greater than themselves.”

Anna couldn’t speak through the tightness in her throat as Papa led her by the hand through the crowd of burly men who each bowed their heads to her.

Once they were off the ship, Papa stooped to Anna’s level and took her face in his hands. “That, my darling, is what it means to be a fearless leader.”

“Was I indom-itable?”

Papa laughed as he stood and then helped her onto her horse. “Yes. And brave and inspiring and—”

“And irrepressible?” Anna asked hopefully.

“You are all of those things, and more, Anna.” Papa sat in his saddle and helped lead her horse around.

As they entered the empty bridge that connected the harbor to the boardwalk, Papa spoke over the squawks of seabirds and the clomp of the horses’ hooves. “Anna, I never want you to doubt yourself and your value. You have a natural empathy for others that allows you to see from their point of view. To identify the very thing that will encourage them the most. It is a rare gift to leave people better than you found them. But you are more than the sum of your parts.”

Anna gazed up at her father, wanting to take in every word, every nuance of his voice, even the glint of the sun off his burnished hair. She swallowed the lump in her throat and asked, “What do you mean, Papa?”

Father tugged their horses to a stop. “Anna, you make me proud just by being yourself. You never have to do anything to earn my approval. I love you just the way you are.”

Anna’s heart ballooned until she felt like she was floating. “Truly, Papa?”

He smiled wide. “Always and forever, dear one.”



Queen Anna looked out at the crowd, hundreds of eyes gazing up at her with varying expressions of anticipation and hope. She saw Oaken, head and shoulders above the rest, hands clasped in front of him as he bounced on his toes. Then, on the edge of the front row, her Kristoff smiled and gave

a nod that sent a swath of unruly blond hair over his eyes. Next to him, Olaf waved a tiny arm, and she could hear his little voice calling out, “Queen Anna! I know her! She’s my friend!”

Anna gave a discreet wave in his direction and searched through the faces again. She’d sent Elsa an invitation and asked her to come and celebrate the day with them. But her sister couldn’t always get away. Elsa was tied to the Enchanted Forest in ways that Anna didn’t quite understand. Still, a tiny part of her had hoped.

The band finished playing their lively rendition of the national anthem, and nerves balled like wet yarn in Anna’s gut. Would the citizens see this new agreement with the Southern Isles as a step forward for their country, or would some allow old resentments to cloud their perception?

Anna took a deep breath, and a voice spoke so loudly in her mind that she nearly jumped. *If you are fortunate, you will have the gift of leadership like my daughter, and you can inspire others to be part of something greater than themselves.*

Inspire them to be part of something greater than themselves... Anna could do that.

Anna squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Good afternoon, citizens of Arendelle!”

The crowd cheered, and Anna smiled.

“We have been given an unprecedented opportunity to bring two nations together. A partnership that my father, King Agnarr, dreamed of solidifying has come to fruition. Arendelle now has a free trade agreement with the Southern Isles!”

As Anna spoke, detailing all the benefits of the arrangement she had painstakingly negotiated, the people hung on her every word, some nodding, smiling, or whispering excitedly to one another. Heart near bursting, Anna spotted the one face she most hoped to see. Elsa! Her sister stood beside Olaf, tears brimming in her eyes as she nodded her encouragement.

“In conclusion, it is with great joy and optimism that I see Arendelle moving into a new era. An era of growth and expansion that will positively impact us individually and as a nation. I invite you to join me in becoming part of this incredible opportunity!”

Cheers and applause erupted, and Olaf rushed the stage, with Elsa and Kristoff not far behind.

“Queen Anna! Do you think the Southern Isles would be interested in adopting some snowgies?” The little snowman cupped a hand around his mouth and stage-whispered, “There are way too many of them.”

Anna laughed. She happened to know that Olaf and the snowgies had a complicated relationship.

“Let’s go, little man,” Kristoff said as he herded Olaf away. “There’s a pumpkin-spice snow cone with Sven’s name on it.”

“Okay!” Olaf hopped from foot to foot. “Did you know that pumpkins are the biggest fruit in the world? They can weigh up to a ton, and I read a story about a carriage made from...”

Anna met the eyes of her sister, but before they could speak, Oaken strode onto the stage.

“Queen Anna! I would like to speak to you about my Hygge for Home products. I believe the Southern Isles would buy in bulk, ja? I’d also like to create franchises of Wandering Oaken’s Sandwiches and Sauna Shoppes.”

As Anna opened her mouth to respond, Elsa stepped forward. “You may set up a meeting with Anna next week, Oaken. But for now, let’s all enjoy the festival.” Elsa placed a delicate hand on the big man’s arm and steered him back toward the celebration.

When Elsa returned, she embraced Anna in a warm hug. “I’ve never been more sure that you were born for this role. Father would be so proud of your accomplishments.”

Anna pulled back and held her sister’s hands. “I know.”

Elsa’s eyes fluttered in surprise before her lips slid into a smile.

“There’s the confidence I like to see.”

Anna grinned. “Papa once told me I was stubborn as a mule and indomitable as a yeti.”

Elsa reared back. “He did?”

“Well, not in those words exactly. But you can hardly disagree.”

“No.” Elsa snickered. “No, I can’t.”

Anna took Elsa’s arm and led her down toward the market. “Can I interest you in a dozen or so snowgies to take to the Enchanted Forest? Olaf says they’ve become a plague, but he can’t bring himself to smite a single one.”

Elsa’s bright, clear laughter lightened Anna’s heart.

When they reached the statue of their parents, they both stopped and placed a hand upon the stone pedestal, as they always did. But this time, as

Anna stared up at her father's sculpted face, she was almost certain she saw him smile down upon her.

Wandering
Oaken and the
Not-So-Hygge Day

By Carey Corp



“Hoo-hoo!”

The big man smiled at his last customer of the day. His large steepled hands opened, fingers wiggling spiritedly as he exclaimed, “Big anniversary blowout! Half off locally carved troll statues, gooseberry lip balm of my own invention, and everything in our new Hygge for Home section, ja?”

The young lady stood in the doorway blinking. She was Arendellian. Oaken could see that much from her clothes. She needed sturdier boots and a heavier cloak—both of which he could supply for a reasonable cost. Most of all, she was an opportunity to practice his pitch for his latest venture one last time.

While her face had yet to react, Oaken took heart in the fact she remained in the shop. He’d dealt with tough sells before. No matter the reason for her visit on this most fortuitous of days, she would leave an ambassador for his growing enterprise. “You are in luck,” he said. “Tomorrow is the grand opening of Oaken’s Family-Friendly Cozy Cottages and Sauna. I am happy to give you an exclusive sneak peek into this new and one-of-a-kind opportunity for the families of Arendelle.”

Oaken stood slowly. Having been large all his life, he knew his size could be off-putting to strangers. But eventually everyone discovered, as his family always said, he was a gentle, hardworking soul. When the woman didn’t so much as flinch as he stepped around the counter, his heart leapt in excitement.

Gesturing toward the area in the back, separated by partially open sheer curtains, he said, “The trading post has been expanded to include a reception space for guest check-in. Come, come!”

Holding back the drapery, he gestured proudly to the room beyond. To the right stood a gleaming, natural wood desk facing one of the coziest places Oaken and his family had ever created. Deep blue chairs and a yellow velvet love seat surrounded three sides of a thick, white shaggy rug. Natural wood end tables were interspersed around the sitting area, and the entire space had been decorated with colorful knitted pillows and throw

blankets. The cocoa table, situated between the furniture, showcased picture books in artfully arranged shapes. It also contained a tray of one of Oaken's Family-Friendly Cozy Cottages' signature amenities: warm, freshly baked walnut cookies, which infused the air with the pleasing aroma of sugar and cinnamon.

Oaken's favorite feature, however, was the shelves of merchandise lining the walls. Directly opposite the reception desk, shelves offered select items from his Hygge for Home line: wool-scented candles, mugs with take-home cocoa mix, cozy picture books, and the like. All with smartly printed labels featuring the Oaken family logo. There were sections for Oaken's ointments, Oaken's anti-ailment remedies, and Oaken's beauty balms—each of his own invention. The shelves on the wall directly across from the curtains contained his newest line of offerings, souvenirs that he called Oaken's Tokens. They contained snow globes, carvings of snowgies, baskets containing the awkwardly revealing yet tastefully traditional towels his family was so fond of wearing, and many other items intended to surprise and delight.

"Oaken's Family-Friendly Cozy Cottages are all inclusive and come with unlimited lutefisk and sauna use. We have a continuous supply of heated towels, warm cookies, and cocoa."

Brows meeting in the middle of her forehead like caterpillars, the woman opened her mouth to speak. A firm believer in seizing every opportunity to wow and delight, Oaken waved a freshly baked cookie under her nose. "Care for a treat?"

She paused in confusion before taking the cookie and nibbling politely.

"Good, ja?" When she nodded, he continued with his pitch. "In addition to such amenities, each guest gets fleecy slippers and a soft, signature towel to wear during their stay that they take home afterward. Guests can choose whether they want to take meals communally in the sauna or in the coziness of their private cabin."

Continuing his spiel, he pivoted and pointed back toward a windowed wooden door situated halfway between the reception area and the trading post counter. "On the board over there is a list of nightly sauna activities. Each evening we offer something different: charades, trivia, sing-alongs, storytelling, and my favorite—the family dance party. Storytelling nights will feature rotating themes, such as spooky speculations, traditional tales, and comedic amusements called Oaken's Jokens. Guests will also receive a

gift bag of assorted all-natural, locally obtained Oaken products, and the kiddies get to select one free item from Oaken's Wall of Tokens as a treasured keepsake of their magical visit."

Grabbing a colorful, hand-knitted satchel from beneath the registration desk, Oaken thrust the bag into the woman's arms. "Since you are getting this very special preview, the Oaken family wants you to have this bag of complimentary cozy items as you consider booking your next getaway with us."

There he paused. That was the pitch in its entirety. He waited, blinking down at the woman, whose expression had not changed in the slightest since she had walked through the door. After a moment, she replied, "I have a delivery. It's on the porch. Sign, please."

As soon as Oaken signed the slip, she turned to leave. No matter that she was a delivery person. Everyone was a potential customer. People who toted packages up and down the mountains for a living had families, too. Following her out the door, he watched as she climbed into her sled. "Remember. Make your hassle-free reservations at Oaken's Cloakens and Sauna, or Oaken's Hus of Hygge tiny beauty salon in the village. Tell your friends! Bye-bye."

Oaken waved as the nice lady disappeared down the lane, then turned his attention to the parcels on his porch. In addition to a bag of walnuts for the cottages' signature cookies, his delivery included a fresh supply of jars and labels from the printer in Arendelle for his latest invention: a carrot-balm beauty face mask. The mask could be used with or in place of the sauna, to give you a fresh, moist glow when you had no time for a good sweat.

Humming to himself, he turned the sign on the door from OPEN to CLOSED and carried the parcels into the store. Soon Wandering Oaken's would become a multi-kingdom destination, more famous than Wes-Lee's, a beloved string of Weselton traveler-respite and goods-of-convenience posts. Of course, Wes-Lee's possessed an iconic mascot. Weslee the Wolverine's likeness greeted weary travelers from large signs along the main trading routes of Weselton. But Arendelle had cute, furry animals, too.

Oaken hurried to the counter to set down his parcels. He grabbed a pencil and his list of ideas for his ever-expanding enterprise. Below *Wandering Oaken's Annual Winterfest: frozen snowground, ice rink, and sliding sleigh adventure ride*, he scrawled *Get adorable mascot*.

Setting the paper on the countertop, he turned his attention to the jars and labels. Tomorrow he and the family would package the rest of the balm for guests. Right now, he only needed enough for himself. As was his tradition on the eve of every new venture, Oaken liked to take time to simulate the customer experience to ensure maximum coziness. A moment of hygge awareness and appreciation. Today he would sample the carrot face mask while eating warm cookies and practicing his jokes during some well-deserved sauna time. That way he could personally ensure the cookies and towels were at the perfect temperature, the jokes would flow smoothly, and the carrot balm would give his face a fresh-sweat radiance that would last for days.

Making a quick things-to-do list in his head, he headed to the cold storage off the stockroom and grabbed the vat of carrot balm. Next he headed into the changing annex of the reception space to shed his rather constricting clothes for a heated, brightly colored towel.

He had gotten the idea from Olaf, who came asking about holiday traditions. The inquisitive little snow person had asked for a towel to take home as a souvenir of his visit. Oaken had been so pleased by the request that he'd given Olaf his favorite towel as a memento. He liked to think of the little fellow wearing it around the castle. Towels were so much cozier than everyday clothes. Plus, it was good advertising, ja?

On his way back through the guest area, he picked up the tray of cookies. While fresh, they were no longer warm. He set them on top of the wood-burning stove. Allowing the tray to warm while he filled one jar of balm would allow the tasty treats to heat to the perfect temperature.

Placing the wooden vat on the counter, he proceeded to fill one tiny jar, affixing it with a dainty label front and center. He and the family would take care of the rest of the jars in the morning. And shell the walnuts. He glanced over toward the nuts.

Huh?

Oaken scratched his head. He could have sworn he'd left the walnuts on the counter next to the jars. But they were no longer there....

Perhaps he'd accidentally taken the bag into the storage room or the changing annex and absentmindedly set it down. He did that sometimes. No matter. They would turn up eventually.

Intent on returning the carrot balm to cold storage, he picked up the vat and made his way across the store. Pausing at the stove, he inhaled the

heavenly aroma of freshly baked cookies. Nearly ready, they would be perfect to eat while having a good, steamy sweat. Remembering he needed to prep the sauna for maximum steam, he set down the vat and backtracked to add water to the sauna stones. Typically, entering Oaken's sauna was like stepping into a tropical oasis. Steamy moisture and the scent of burning cedar tickled the senses. But not this time. The place was as cold as Elsa's ice palace.

The fire that heated the sauna had gone out, and the extra wood was gone. Strange; he could have sworn his family had restocked it earlier that day. Nothing, however, was burning—except the cookies! With no cedar aroma to distract, he could clearly smell them. Rushing out of the sauna, he raced to the stove and carefully lifted the tray using the corner of his towel to protect his fingers.

The cookies had definitely exceeded optimal warmth.

No matter. A moment on the porch while he collected more wood for the sauna would be just the right amount of time to cool them off. He had just set the tray on the porch railing and turned toward the woodpile when a familiar high-pitched squeak echoed from inside.

Oofta! Not again.

The sauna door slammed shut just before he reached it. Peering through the window confirmed his fears—three ecstatic snowgies, led by that scoundrel William, had barricaded themselves in the sauna and were building a fort out of wood and colorful towels.

Did Marshmallow know William was causing mischief down the mountain? How had he and the others gotten all the way to the trading post?

BANG!

Rattling outside led Oaken to deduce the three snowgies weren't alone. Creeping to the front door, Oaken listened to the noises coming from the porch. Convinced that whatever was making the racket was complicit in the snowgies' coup, the shopkeeper threw open the door, coming nose to nose with a most unexpected accomplice. Mouth stuffed full of cookies, the creature swallowed with a resounding gulp. A second later, its mouth opened wide as steam from the flaming-hot snack rose from its throat. Sucking in a lungful of air, the animal let out a huge yawn to cool its brain.

"Sven!" Oaken reprimanded. "What have we talked about? You can't just eat things that belong to someone else. You need to ask permission first, ja?"

“Bwrahf.” Sven brayed out an apology and nosed the tray with its two remaining cookies toward the shopkeeper. Thankfully these were a test batch and not needed for guests. But still, the animal needed to respect the boundaries they’d drawn. Sven’s other companion—the big blond ice boy—was fond of saying reindeers were better than people. But people didn’t tend to eat everything not nailed down.

The reindeer brayed again, batting his long lashes. At least Sven seemed sorry for his actions. His tiny menace of a buddy was another story entirely. William had no respect for anyone’s authority. And this time, the rebellious snowgie had brought reinforcements.

“As payment for your snack, Sven, please go get Olaf. Tell him William is loose again, ja?”

The reindeer hesitated for an instant, and Oaken had to make the stern face with the eyebrows before Sven grunted in agreement and headed down the lane. If not for his insatiable appetite, Sven might make a good mascot for his latest franchise. Oaken would have a think on that while he shelled some nuts for a new batch of cookies.

Where did that bag of walnuts go?

“Hoo-hoo!”

As he reentered the store in search of nuts, the sauna door nudged open and a voice called out. Lunging forward, Oaken leapt hands-first into the opening, just in time to prevent the door from slamming shut. “Got you!”

He grabbed for William, and the sauna went dark. One of the snowgie cohorts had pulled his hat over his eyes. Not one to be bested by balls of snow, Oaken removed the hat and stood to his full height. When he reached down to pick up the nearest snowgie, another hopped across his back, causing enough of a distraction for the first one to slip his grasp. All three chuckled like it was the funniest trick ever. He reached out again with the same results.

This game of leap-over-the-frog went on for a few rounds before Oaken got tired of being the frog. *Oofta!* Olaf could deal with them. Throwing his hands in the air, he abandoned the sauna and resumed the hunt for his bag of nuts.

Forgotten next to the hot stove, the vat of carrot balm had turned to liquid. No worries. He would set it outside and it would be solid again in no time.

After placing the vat on the porch, he retraced his steps through the reception area. Sometime during the chaos, a display of all-natural pastes for the teeth had clattered to the floor. He'd tested many flavors over the years, but to date only three variations earned family approval: minty, no flavor for the sensitive of mouth, and family-favorite Arctic Bramble Berry. Oaken restacked the tins next to the gifting baskets for all ages and every occasion.

Next he surveyed the changing annex, again without success. Walking to the reception desk, he caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye. When he turned toward the shelves, nothing seemed amiss. Except the tins of pastes for the teeth were once again on the ground. Moving slowly, he carefully inspected the shelves of merchandise, starting with the products and progressing to the souvenirs. All seemed in order.

Shelves gleamed with snow globes, replicas of the North Mountain, and carved figurines. But somewhere between the troll-like dolls, carvings of snowgies, and cloth animals stuffed with fluff, two eerily realistic statues on the top shelf caught his attention.

"Hoo-hoo! What are you?"

They each looked like a cross between a preserved squirrel and a nutcracker. One wore a tiny knitted topplue, identical to Oaken's own hat. The other donned a doll-sized troll souvenir sweater. He recognized both items from his miniature mementos display. The one with the sweater had excessively bushy red ears that reminded him of his granduncle Hugo. The other possessed a droopy sort of mustache reminiscent of Cousin Lars. Between their paws, each held a death grip on a walnut.

Fragments of shells littered the space around them.

Oaken stared at the unmoving beady eyes while inching closer. Suddenly one of the figures blinked. With a screech, they both came to life. Before he could even process what was happening, a walnut whizzed past his head.

Calling back and forth in a chirpy trill that sounded almost like a woodpecker, the squirrels scampered along the shelf in an effort to get away.

At least he'd figured out what had happened to the walnuts.

"Come here, you!" He chased Hugo and Lars—now that he had noticed the resemblances, he couldn't think of them as anything else—to the far corner of the reception area. As he closed the distance between them, Hugo

lobbed another walnut at Oaken's face. He ducked, but his elation was short-lived as Lars's walnut bonked him in the noggin.

"Oof," he grunted, as the bell over the shop's front door chimed.

"Hello?" called a familiar voice. "I've come for my little brothers."

He would deal with Hugo and Lars after he helped Olaf get rid of those little snowgie terrors. "Olaf. William and his friends have taken over my sauna *again*, ja?"

The little snowfellow wobbled in on his little snowball feet. "Sorry, Mr. Fuzzy Oaken Man-Bear. Sometimes William tumbles down the mountain before anyone can stop him. He doesn't mean to cause trouble—he's just packed that way. But don't worry, I'll get him out."

The snowman turned toward the sauna, then abruptly swung back around. "A night of sauna trivia!" he exclaimed with huge eyes. "Can I be the host? Pleeese."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that." Oaken recalled the last time Olaf had visited his sauna. Even if the little snowman didn't become an instant puddle, his permafrost presence in the sultry sauna could be a source of anxiety for his guests. But the frosty font of facts would make the perfect trivia host given the right circumstances.

Not one to quit easily, Oaken had a flash of inspiration. "Tell you what. You get those brothers of yours back up the mountain and keep them away, and you can be the special trivia host at our first annual outdoor event: Wandering Oaken's Annual Winterfest and Holiday Market. Ja?"

"Thank you so much!" Olaf blinked and added, "Did you know turtles can breathe through their butts?"

"Oh, ja? Did you know elephants sweat through their toenails?"

"*What?* That's great!"

WHOMP!

A snowball hit Olaf square in the face, followed by a second and a third. With his nose poking through the back of his snow head, Olaf looked at Oaken. "Whoa! Head rush. Could you...?"

"Ja." Oaken carefully pushed the carrot into its rightful place. He caught a flurry of white before a snowball disintegrated against his massive chest and the sauna door slammed shut.

Properly motivated, Olaf faced the sauna. "William! Crystal! Fridge! Marshmallow has been looking all over for you. Stop causing pandemonium and yield presently, you little rascallions."

“Ooh. Someone has been reading their word-a-day calendar and top gift pick for the holidays.” Oaken had given one to all his best customers.

Olaf nodded. “Indubitably, my uninhibited, congenial hirsute acquaintance.”

The sauna door opened a crack and Oaken’s list of ideas sailed out. As it landed facedown, Oaken saw the crude drawing of a rounded figure with buckteeth, four crooked lines sprouting from above its overly large brows, stick arms, three dark buttons, and a grossly disproportionate carrot nose. The caricature had a circle around it with a line through the middle.

“No Olafs allowed!” the snowman interpreted. “That’s not very amicable.”

Oofta. It was not. But it did give Oaken an idea.

“Hoo-hoo!” he called. “Little snow rascallions, if you come out now, mind your big brother, and stop turning the sauna into a snow fort, I will give you complimentary passes to Wandering Oaken’s Annual Winterfest, including unlimited ice-skating and all the snow cones you can wear.”

If it kept them and their antics away from his guests, it would be worth it. Plus, they would be rainbow-colored for weeks, all the more easily spotted coming his way.

A commotion rose from inside the sauna. After a few moments, the door opened wide and the three contrite snowgies toddled out. In the space beyond, Oaken could see they’d tidied up their mess. The used towels were piled in a basket, and the wood was returned to its spot. William extended Oaken’s hat as a peace offering.

With a nod of approval, Oaken said, “Very good. I will see you all at the winterfest, ja?”

“Unquestionably, my substantial, genial, ruddy-faced *Homo sapiens* compatriot.” With his little brothers in tow, Olaf herded them out of the trading post.

Grabbing the basket of soiled towels, Oaken carried it into the reception area. He listened as the front doorbell chimed; confirmation that his unwanted guests were, indeed, gone. Just before the door shut behind the snowman, he heard, “Thank you again, Sven.”

Oaken experienced a moment of what Olaf would call trepidation that the rapacious reindeer had devoured the remaining two cookies. Glancing at the reception desk, he confirmed the signature treats were safe. The carrot balm, however—

SCHLURHP!

The animal's tongue swirled around his entire mouth twice. It looked like a red waterspout—all circular motion and drops of moisture. Instead of looking contrite, the reindeer grinned. Large eyes gleaming, he bobbed his head and chuckled as if to say, *Good stuff, ja?*

The vat was completely empty. Oaken opened his mouth to chide the animal, but before he could get the words out, Sven dropped to the ground.

Oofta! Just as Granduncle Hugo predicted—his concoctions had finally killed someone!

“Sven? Hoo-hoo!”

To his immense relief, the reindeer's tail began to wag. Rolling onto his back, the massive creature wriggled euphorically back and forth in the snow. Like a little cat with an olive, the reindeer began to make mewling noises.

“Oaken, have you seen Sve—” Kristoff ran up the lane, his typically carefree face puckered in concern. “What did you do to my reindeer?”

“What did I do to him?” Oaken's hands fisted on his hips. “You should be asking, what did he do to me?”

With a bout of sudden remorse, the reindeer stopped rolling in the snow. But he couldn't quite keep his dopey smile in check.

“Sven?” Kristoff glared at the reindeer, waiting as the creature got to his feet. Kristoff stepped closer until they were big nose to big nose and sniffed. “Open up!”

The creature's eyes rolled up toward the sky before he reluctantly parted his mouth. Kristoff inhaled deeply, declaring, “Huh? Carrots and walnuts.”

Unable to conceal his pleasure, Sven's tail commenced wagging as he brayed and bobbed his head up and down.

“Ja. Sven ate most of my signature cookies and all of my carrot-balm face mask, for the fresh sweat-glow.”

Still leaning toward the animal, but turning to face Oaken, Kristoff said in his deeper Sven voice, “I'm so sorry, Mr. Wandering Oaken. I just couldn't help myself. Walnuts and carrots are my favorite.” The reindeer brayed again to emphasize his agreement.

In his regular tone, Kristoff said, “Now, Sven, we talked about this. You can't devour things that don't belong to you without permission.”

“I know. I really am sorry.” Why did the blond fellow insist on speaking for a creature that could clearly speak for itself? Oaken found the peculiar

habit unnecessary—but was quick to overlook others’ oddities. His customers came in all shapes, sizes, and species.

The contrite expression on Sven’s face, still slightly rapturous from his latest pilfered snack, spoke volumes. The creature did feel remorse. And Oaken had gained some valuable test information in the process. “No worries. I can replace what was eaten.”

If Hugo and Lars hadn’t demolished all the walnuts...

Kristoff chuckled. “Maybe you should consider repackaging the carrot stuff as a reindeer treat?”

Sven brayed enthusiastically. The shaggy companion had provided valuable cross-species consumption testing on more than one occasion.

Oaken was already ahead of them in calculating the potential to delight more than just his two-legged guests. “Ja. I will give it a good think.”

“While I’m here, can I get a bottle of your 3-in-1 Reindeer Wash?” Although originally intended for reindeer, Kristoff and his troll family also used the product—thus the 3-in-1.

“Right this way.” Oaken led him through the recently reorganized Hygge for Home section. “North Mountain Ice or Fresh Fjord?”

“Better give me both. Bulda prefers Mountain Ice, but Sven and I like the Fjord better.”

It did have a most pleasing woodsy aroma. “Do you require anything else? In addition to colorful traditional towels for the sauna, we have expanded our line to include smaller, happy-drying-of-the-hands towels.”

“Why would I need that when I have trousers?”

“How about a colorful cloth for washing?” He waved the patterned square under Kristoff’s nose. “Makes bathing more fun, ja?”

“If you say so.”

Kristoff was a tough sell. However, there were other ways he could be useful. “Did you see our upcoming sauna events? You and Queen Anna would especially like Oaken’s Jokens Night of Comedy. A hilarious evening of family anecdotes, Papa Peder’s puns, and Hoo-hoo! jokes.” He also hoped to get some of Arendelle’s best storytellers to come and regale guests on a semi-regular basis once the events gained notoriety.

“I’ve been working on a Hoo-hoo! joke that you will enjoy, ja?”

“Uh, sure. I guess.” Kristoff frowned. At least Oaken presumed that was the case, but since the fellow had a limited range of expressions, one could never be sure with him. But an audience was an audience....

“Hoo-hoo!” After a moment of uncomfortable silence, he added, “Now you say, ‘Who could it be that is knocking at my door?’”

“Do I have to?” Kristoff shrugged. “Can’t I just say, ‘Come in?’”

“Do you want to hear the joke or not?”

“Actually, I really don’t care—”

“Hoo-hoo!”

“Fine,” Kristoff grumbled, before unenthusiastically doing his part. “Who could it be that is knocking at my door?”

“It is I, ELLL-SA.”

Again, Kristoff hesitated. Oaken lifted his brows in encouragement, eliciting a very lackluster, “Elsa who?”

“Let me in. ELLL-SA I turn your sauna into an icehouse.”

Without a change to his expression or voice, Kristoff replied, “Good one.”

THUMP!

Oaken and Kristoff hurried toward the sound. Curled into a ball on the porch, Sven proceeded to take a nap. Kristoff took hold of the creature’s collar. “Come on, buddy. You can’t sleep here.”

The reindeer rolled on his back, legs in the air, and proceeded to snore. After a couple more unsuccessful attempts to wake him, Kristoff turned to Oaken. “Sorry. I’ve never seen him like this. Are you sure Sven is going to be okay?”

“Ja. I will keep an eye on him.” Kristoff was a good customer. Their relationship had come a long way since the misunderstanding during the Big Summer Blowout. And as sorry as Sven felt for his behavior, Oaken felt worse for breaking him.

“I’ll add a quart of lutefisk so we have good feelings.” While he rushed to get the jar, Kristoff fiddled with the sign on the door.

Holding a small Oaken’s bag for the toting of goods and the jar of lutefisk that Oaken had just brought him, Kristoff cast a final glance at his reindeer. “Just send him home when he wakes up, I guess.”

“Sure thing. Bye-bye.”

Oaken waved reassuringly until Queen Anna’s beau disappeared from sight. He’d meant what he said about keeping an eye on Sven while he righted what had gone off course during the day. He needed to heat the sauna, prepare ingredients for another batch of carrot balm, expel Hugo and

Lars from the store, tidy up, and shell any walnut he could salvage. *Oofta!* If he hurried, he could still manage a quick sweat before family dinner.

He started a fire in the sauna. He would need to replenish the basket with fresh towels after he ousted the squirrels from the reception area. Scouring the shelves of merchandise for two sets of beady eyes, he could not find any signs of the furry bandits except for the carnage left behind. They'd vanished into thin air along with the nuts. Perhaps they'd exited the same way they'd entered.

And perhaps he could use raisins instead of walnuts in the cookies. He would have a good think on that while he straightened up.

He righted various tokens, brushing fragments of walnut shells onto the floor. Next he swept up the debris and uncluttered the reception desk. In the cold-storage room, he set aside the necessary ingredients for carrot balm (carrots, ginger, mushrooms, and the like), which he would prepare in the morning while Oaken's Family-Friendly Cozy Cottages and Sauna signature warm raisin cookies were baking.

Finally free of reindeer, snowgies, and squirrels, Oaken intended to salvage the remaining sliver of afternoon for himself. He added water to the sauna's hot stones to create steam. He rewarmed the two remaining cookies to the perfect temperature, set the single jar of carrot-balm face mask—slash possible reindeer treat—on the reception desk, and changed into a fresh towel. *Time to enjoy the hygge!*

"Hey-ho!"

Oaken looked up to see two strangers in unfamiliar garb approaching. "We are Ethan and Joseph of the Southern Isles. We're so happy to find you are open. We heard about your legendary cottages and sauna and were wondering if we could book one for the night?"

Although he hadn't planned on opening until the next day, Oaken understood the date didn't have to be set in stone. The cabins were ready, and having visitors this evening would allow him to softly work out any remaining knots before the big opening. "We do, ja."

"Ethan, look." The other fellow pointed to the awkwardly revealing yet tastefully traditional towel around Oaken's midsection. "We are always saying that proprietors should represent the feel of an establishment. Isn't the towel a nice touch?"

"And the shelves of unique souvenirs and beauty products, Joseph. They are simply herlig, yes?"

Oaken beamed as the Southern Islanders complimented the meticulous details of his latest achievement. “May I ask how you heard about us?”

Ethan, the smaller of the two fellows, replied using his hands to illustrate his explanation. “A delivery person we were stopping for directions told us Oaken’s Family-Friendly Cozy Cottages and Sauna are not to be missed. So here we are.”

Joseph pointed to the basket of towels next to the reception desk. “Look, Ethan. They have adorable little mascots.”

“Like Wes-Lee’s,” Ethan replied with a broad smile. “Only these fellows are much cuter than the Weselton wolverine. Yes?”

Oaken peered into the basket that would have been restocked if he’d known about the early guests. Nestled among the colorful, cozy towels were Hugo and Lars, sound asleep. One of the visitors stroked Hugo’s ears, causing him to purr. Oaken decided on the spot to keep them. As mascots went, two nut-crazy squirrels would be easier to wrangle than a gaggle of mischievous snowgies or even one voracious reindeer.

“I like this place,” Ethan declared. “We are going to tell all our friends of the Southern Isles about Oaken’s when we get home.”

“And that real-live reindeer curled up on the porch—it’s just so cozy.” Joseph grinned like a kiddie in a sweet shoppe. “I may never want to leave.”

“We must buy as many of these cute souvenirs as our travel trunks will fit, yes?”

“Agreed.”

Switching into host mode, Oaken grabbed two sets of slippers and towels and set them on the counter next to the single jar of carrot balm.

“Might I invite you to start your stay with a warm cookie, a stimulating face mask, and a family sweat while I take your things to our best cottage, ja?”

“Ja!”

As the first guests changed and then headed into the steaming sauna, Oaken couldn’t help feeling his own glow of optimism, like a carrot-balm mask for the soul. While his day hadn’t gone exactly as planned, it had been successful. He’d gained memorable mascots, expanded his product line, and secured a trivia host for his first annual winterfest. He’d also reaped the benefits of word-of-mouth advertising and satisfied his repeat customers. It reminded him of something that his granduncle Hugo was fond of quoting from his favorite storyteller: *All’s good that ends good, ja?*

No matter if the day turned out as planned or not, regardless of whether new ventures succeeded or failed, at the end of the day he would return home to a place of comfort and warmth, where his family would be waiting to embrace him with ample hugs. If he happened to share even a fraction of that feeling with the guests at Oaken's Family-Friendly Cozy Cottages and Sauna—what could be more hygge than that?

Elsa
and the
Frost Monster

By Vera Strange



“Noooooooooooo!” Elsa screamed in horror as frost exploded from her bare fingertips and spread out over the throne room, freezing anything in its path and turning it into ice.

Despite her protests, the floors, the vaulted ceiling, and the walls studded with columns and thick draperies all succumbed to the terrible bite of this swirling wintry blast. She’d only meant to play around and make ice sculptures, but it had gotten out of control. She tried to stop it, but—to *her horror*—the magic kept flowing and grew stronger.

And wilder, too.

“Elsa... please...” Anna whimpered, her white hair swirling around her angelic face. She ran toward Elsa in desperation but slipped on the black ice, collapsing in a heap.

“I’m sorry...” Elsa gasped from her throne, totally in the grip of the spell spewing from her hands and freezing everything. “I can’t make it stop.... I’m trying....”

“Stop, it’s not fun anymore,” Anna said in a terrified voice. Soon she’d get hit by the wintry blast enveloping the throne room. “Can’t you see? This is getting out of hand.”

Elsa struggled harder to stem the magic flowing from her fingertips—but it backfired. Sharp icicles sprang out like daggers at Anna in a circle around her. One shard sliced her sister’s arm, while others shot out like knives aiming at her throat.

Still Elsa couldn’t stem the magic. She gritted her teeth and fought back, but then—

Something *worse* happened.

The frost spewing from her fingertips took on solid form, sprouting arms, spindly legs, and a mouth studded with razor-sharp icicle teeth. The monstrous creation landed with a *thud* on the ice. The snow monster whipped around and fixed on the only thing in its line of sight—

Anna.

The creature cracked open its jagged mouth and roared, emitting a wintry gale from its throat that froze anything in its immediate path. Then it leapt at her sister.

“Anna, watch out,” Elsa cried. “I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to do it—”

That was when Elsa woke up with a scream on her lips, but it came out as only a sharp whisper. She thrashed around in her bedroom in a panic. Her heart thumped with icy terror, while a deep chill shot through her body. She blinked in the dim light of her room.

She yanked her hands up, but no frost sprang from her bare fingertips. She was lying in bed—not in the throne room—ensconced under a tumble of silken covers.

And she wasn’t alone.

Anna slept soundly next to her, a thin ribbon of drool falling adorably from her rosy lips, while her messy strawberry hair exploded like a wild crown around her head. She sighed and rolled over. Elsa relaxed at the sight of her sister safe and sound—and *unfrozen*—though her heart still beat faster than normal from the terror of the dream. With a deep sigh, she sat up in bed.

It was only a terrible nightmare.

None of that was real.

The shards and remnants were already fading, but not enough. She knew the reason for the dream. Clearly, it sprang from her darker memories, like the worst nightmares usually did. *I can control it now*, she reassured herself. *It won’t get out of hand like that... ever again.*

This was also her solemn promise to Anna. She remembered how she’d accidentally frozen her sister’s heart. The memory still haunted her. Time did not fade the horror or make it less painful.

Everything that had happened since she returned from her ice palace, unthawed the kingdom, and ascended the throne swirled through her head again like snowflakes. For a moment she tensed up with worry and fear, but she reminded herself that it was all buried in the past. And just like her nightmare, it couldn’t hurt her now.

But even so, she had to be careful and remain vigilant. Elsa glanced down at her beloved Anna sleeping soundly on the pillow—a daily reminder of why Elsa had to stay in control.

“You’re safe now,” she whispered to a still slumbering Anna. Her sister flipped over with a moan, wiped the drool, then murmured some nonsense.

“Ice unicorn... you can’t fly off like that... don’t be silly... come back now... it’s time for supper...”

Elsa smiled. At least that sounded like a nice dream, even if the unicorn was trying to fly away. When they were kids, Anna would always beg Elsa to play with her and build a snowman. She loved that her sister had this sweet, whimsical side. She hoped Anna never lost it.

Elsa patted her sister, pulling the covers up to let her keep sleeping. Then she rose from bed and padded over to the tall windows, thrusting the thick curtains open and letting bright sunlight spill into the large bedchamber. Dust—*not snowflakes*—swirled through the errant sunbeams, performing an intricate dance. She marveled at the beauty of Arendelle. It promised to be another warm day. And it was most welcome by everyone after the harsh, unnatural winter.

Across the room, Elsa caught sight of her own appearance in the dressing mirror. Her icy blue eyes and blond tresses gave her a captivating appearance, despite the untamed state of her hair. She raised her hands and fluttered them. No unbidden magic burst from her bare fingertips. She didn’t even need to wear her protective gloves anymore. And she didn’t miss them.

Next to the mirror and dressing stand stood a mannequin fitted with a pale blue gown with a shimmering, translucent cape.

Everything appeared in order; nothing seemed amiss. Her nightmare was powerless in the warm sunlight, which melted the last shadowy tendrils away, taking the bad memories with it.

Elsa relaxed and yawned, gazing through the window at her kingdom. Outside the castle walls the sun rose higher, warming everything that its radiant light touched. Winter was a distant memory, and Arendelle was thriving again. She could see down to the castle gates, open ever since her return, when she’d thawed the lands from the extreme winter she had accidentally unleashed, brought back summer, and reclaimed her throne, inherited from her parents. Even though she had grown up in the castle with this view, it never grew old—and it never ceased to amaze her.

Beyond the gates the village teemed with life. Folks meandered down the cobblestone streets, chatting with one another as they sold and purchased wares and supplies, while beyond the busy town streets, the luscious green farmland spread out and blossomed with crops that would

sustain them and keep them fed whenever winter eventually did return—a *natural* winter.

It had been scarcely a month since the great thaw, but life in Arendelle had been peaceful, sunlit, and carefree. The frost had stayed away. And Elsa knew the reason. She had gained full control of her powers. They worked for her now, not the other way around.

All had been quiet....

Almost too quiet.

Then last week, the whispers had started. The rumors spread to the castle gates. The farmers spoke of a strange frost spreading from the North Mountain and chilling their crops, freezing them down to the roots, causing blight and endangering the summer harvest.

Despite the sun's warmth, everyone knew that fall would come eventually, and then, following on crisp heels would be winter's natural return. For this was a land of many seasons. But the rumors spoke of something different and dangerous.

Some gossip even blamed the queen for this unnatural frost, though Elsa knew it wasn't her doing this time. Her eyes darted to the North Mountain, capped with snow and looming over them, where she'd erected her ice palace. She hadn't been back since her return to Arendelle.

No, this freeze wasn't coming from her.

Or was it?

Suddenly snowflakes burst from her fingertips, melting harmlessly in the bright sunlight, then falling like tiny droplets on the floor. Then the flurries stopped falling. No, it wasn't her. She was sure of it. She still had control. She could turn it on and off like a faucet.

Could the frost be natural? she wondered for the hundredth time that week, gazing down at the sprawling farmlands. But no, it was too early for that. Fall hadn't even touched the leaves yet, tinting them into a blast of color, then making them wither, crackle, and fall like dry rain.

Still, the rumors and gossip had a cause. Something had spooked the farmers. And it needed to be addressed sooner rather than later, before it infected the whole kingdom.

That was when she spotted Sven and Kristoff galloping down the road toward the village. Their sled had wheels now, fitted for summer travel. Her heart leapt at the promise of their return. Last week she had asked Kristoff and Sven to investigate the rumors on their next ice delivery run. She still

hoped that it was merely superstition and gossip fueling the rumors, but she feared it was something more.

With that ominous worry, Elsa got dressed in a hurry, rushing from the castle and leaving Anna to her slumber and sweet unicorn-filled dreams.



Elsa ventured into the village, her light blue cape trailing behind her. She waved to passersby.

“Your Majesty,” they answered her greeting, nodding respectfully to her. But something turned their lips downward into frowns.

Something made them wary.

This unsettled her.

Usually the villagers chattered in excitement whenever she ventured from the castle and joined their throngs in the bustling streets. But maybe she was just being paranoid and imagining it. Still, it continued to bother her as she proceeded through the town. At the hitching posts she spotted a familiar tall figure with floppy sandy-blond hair.

She smiled at the sight of him. He always seemed in dire need of a haircut, but that appeared to be part of his easy charm. It was Kristoff—and he was never far from Sven.

The duo stood next to their lacquered sled, a gift from her sister. The back was packed with fresh harvest from the local farms. In addition to hauling ice, they ferried food and supplies from the local farms to the shops in the village. Sven especially loved his new job, since it came with one extra-big perk.

“Carrot?” Elsa said as her way of greeting them, sauntering up and offering one to the reindeer from the sled. Kristoff always kept a burlap sack of them on hand.

Sven chomped on it heartily, flashing one of his signature goofy grins, complete with his long, sloppy tongue licking at his lips. He seemed to be thanking her without Kristoff’s voice actually giving words to it.

“Oh, I see how it is,” Kristoff said, pretending to be offended. “Sven gets all the attention around here. And what about me?”

“Well, he is the better-looking one,” Elsa said playfully.

Sven basked in her attention and seemed to smile.

They both laughed.

“Plus, isn’t giving you *attention* Anna’s job?” Elsa teased, making Kristoff blush. But then she turned serious. “Something’s got the villagers spooked today. Is it the rumors?”

Kristoff frowned, matching her somber mood.

“I’m sorry to report... it’s as you feared.”

The words hit Elsa like an icy dagger. “The frost? Blighting the crops?”

“Yes, I’ve been all over Arendelle to the farms and smaller villages on the outskirts of the lands. They’re all afraid. Something’s freezing their crops. It’s worse near the North Mountain.”

Elsa felt another stab of worry. Even Sven looked concerned with this news. “But what’s causing it? The sun shines nonstop since the great thaw. It’s too warm for any frost.”

“Right, that’s the real mystery,” Kristoff said with a sigh. “The only snow clings to the highest peak on the North Mountain. The elevation keeps it frozen, even in summer. But they say that this is afflicting the farmlands in the lower altitudes. It doesn’t make any sense.”

They both turned to look at the towering mountain in the distance. That was where Elsa had built her ice palace when she ran away and let it all go. They didn’t often speak of that time in her life, when she’d found her true self but also inadvertently hurt those she loved the most.

But the unspoken memory hung in the silence between them. She hadn’t been back to the North Mountain since that time. She wasn’t sure that she wanted to go back, either.

She pulled her gaze away and turned toward Kristoff. His face looked pinched and worried. She could tell that he wasn’t telling her something. “What is it?” she said, nudging his shoulder. “Spit it out already. You know, I’m your queen. I can order you to speak,” she teased.

Sven gave Kristoff a hard look.

Another moment passed before he broached it.

“I didn’t want to tell you,” he said, scratching his head awkwardly and not meeting her gaze. “But some folks... are blaming you. They speak of an old myth about a frost creature. They think maybe the myths are talking about you. But it’s just superstitious nonsense.”

“Me?” she said in surprise, feeling her heart plunge in her chest. “But I swear, this isn’t my doing. I have control now. Look, the sun is shining. The temperatures rise each day. Summer has returned and will stay for some time.”

“Of course—you’re right. I know it’s not you,” Kristoff said, as Sven nodded in agreement. “But the villagers are superstitious. They still remember the great freeze—and how they almost lost everything to the frost. They fear it could be happening again.”

Elsa remembered the frowns and suspicious looks cast her way as she wandered down the cobblestone streets today. So it hadn’t been her imagination. They still feared her—and *more so*, they feared the magic that lived within her. No amount of reassurance would change that. There was only one solution. She had to find the source of this mysterious frost. And put a stop to it.

And fast.

“Then I must leave at once to investigate it,” Elsa started, but Kristoff stopped her.

“No, Sven and I will go,” he said firmly. “We need to make some returns anyway. Also, they’re more likely to confide in me and tell the truth. Maybe I can find out the cause—and stop it before it gets out of hand. Hopefully, it’s just superstitions amplified by fear and rumors.”

“And if not?” she asked, biting her lip. “What if it’s real?”

“Then we’ll find a way to stop it,” Kristoff said. “After all, we’ve faced worse before.”

Kristoff was right. This problem they could handle. Crops naturally froze when fall turned sharply to winter anyway. But frozen hearts were something else. They could not be easily mended. Only an act of pure love could thaw them.

Suddenly a group of kids ran by, giggling and chasing after one another. But then their eyes fell on Elsa. They skidded to a halt; their giggles ceased. Their mother hurried over and shooed them away with a deferential bow and a “Your Majesty.”

Kristoff climbed into his sled and tossed the kids some fresh apples from the bushels in the back. But they were afraid of her. That meant even the children must have heard the rumors. However, before she could dwell on it, a familiar voice reverberated through the streets.

And it was most welcome.

“There you are—I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

It was Anna.

She wore a beautiful, light, summery sheath paired with soft brown leather boots. A chartreuse cloak that matched her dress was draped

elegantly across her shoulders.

“Are you off again so soon?” she asked when her eyes fell on Kristoff in his sled.

Anna looked disappointed. The love between them was utterly infectious. It warmed Elsa’s heart, as always. Seeing her sister happy was the single most important thing in the world to her.

“Right, Elsa has a little mission for me,” Kristoff said, while Sven snorted. “Something about a mysterious frost and rumors in the farmlands. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Well, then, care for some company?” Anna said, sliding onto the seat next to Kristoff and assuming her place. *It wasn’t a question.* Clearly, she was going with him.

“Seriously, mysterious frost sounds... exciting,” she added with an impish grin, resting her boots on his lacquered sled, much to Kristoff’s dismay. “I need some fresh air. And some fun.”

“Anna, I don’t know if that’s a good idea...” Elsa started.

But her sister gave her *that* look.

The stubborn one. The one that meant she wouldn’t change her mind.

“You’re right. It’s not a *good* idea—it’s a *great* idea,” Anna said, with a smirk. “Summer is delightful. Olaf loves it. But I miss a little adventure.”

“Would a no dissuade you from coming along?” Kristoff asked with a wink. Sven raised his eyebrows, warning Kristoff that he was treading on dangerous territory.

“Listen, I’m your princess,” Anna said, slipping into a faux authoritative tone. “That means I give the orders, not the other way around. I’m coming—and that’s final.”

They all laughed at this repartee. But then Anna grinned at Kristoff.

“Plus, admit it—you missed me.”

“What do you mean? Sven is great company,” Kristoff said.

The reindeer grinned, but then he backpedaled when Anna glanced at him. “Also, you don’t even need to ask that. You know that I always miss you. And so does Sven.”

Sven snorted, while Anna leaned over and kissed his furry cheek with her rosy lips, making the reindeer dip his head bashfully. But then Sven licked her with his long tongue.

It was both gross and utterly charming.

Anna wiped it off with a giggle, then tossed him another carrot, which he crunched happily. She also obliged Kristoff with a kiss on his cheek.

Elsa knew better than to try to talk any of them out of this adventure. Plus, Kristoff was right. Maybe they could help her and get to the bottom of what was causing the rumors.

“Fine, but don’t be gone too long,” Elsa said. “Promise?”

“Promise,” they said in unison.

Elsa watched them gallop away into the late afternoon sunlight, then returned to the castle. They were brave, intelligent, and strong-willed. If anyone could get to the bottom of this problem, it was them. But even so, Elsa had a bad feeling about it—actually... about everything, suddenly. She felt a chill despite the hot sun beating down on her back.

Magic swirled in the complex tangle of emotions, threatening to burst from her fingertips. But she fought to slow her racing heart and keep her powers under control. A few deep breaths and she finally calmed her heart, and magic. The chill left her body.

But one thing was clear—

This had to be remedied.

And fast, before the rumors spread further into Arendelle.



Two days passed without Anna and Kristoff’s return.

On the third day, Elsa began to worry something terrible had happened. She woke to the sounds of a ruckus beyond the castle gates. She ran to the window from her empty bed and thrust open the curtains—just in time to see Sven dash toward the castle, still pulling his sled....

Only it was empty.

There was no sign of Kristoff or Anna.

Elsa felt her heart plummet as icy shivers plunged through her veins. Worse, Sven had a spooked look in his eyes. The poor reindeer was... *terrified*. Something awful had happened.

Elsa dressed quickly, grabbed her cloak, and then rushed down the stairs. On her way out of the castle, she heard a familiar voice echo through the halls after her.

“Elsa... wait up,” Olaf said, scrambling to catch her.

“Hurry, something has happened,” she said.

He waddled faster. “You know, it’s hard to run without proper legs.”

They burst outside, and Elsa rushed over to Sven, who was stamping around and looking really upset in the courtyard.

“Sven... what happened?” she said, trying to calm the poor reindeer. She reached into the burlap sack in the sleigh for a carrot, but then pulled her hand back with a start.

The carrot was... *frozen*.

Ice crystals clung to the delicate green fronds. How could this be?

“The frost?” she whispered to Sven, holding up the carrot.

Sven nodded and pawed the ground. It wasn’t just a superstitious rumor—it was real. Something had frozen the carrots. She noticed strange marks on Sven’s back.

“Good boy, Sven. Steady now,” Elsa said, investigating the markings seared into his hide. She looked up at him with in concern. “Frost burns? But... how?”

Again, Sven nodded emphatically and pawed the ground.

Olaf cowered behind her. He seemed worried, too.

Elsa thought back to the superstitions. “You mean the Frost Monster is real?” she asked. “Does it have Anna and Kristoff?”

Sven nodded, looking afraid.

Elsa struggled to make sense of it. Frost creature myths were stories told to frighten children and keep them from running off into wintry blizzards. She had assumed they were simply that—myths. But the strange frost afflicting the farmlands... the rumors and gossip... the frozen carrots... the ice burns on Sven’s back... and now, Kristoff and Anna were missing.

Something had to be causing all of it.

Elsa made a snap decision. “Olaf, come on. You’re coming with me. We’ve got to find Kristoff and Anna—and rescue them from the Frost Monster. They’re in grave danger.”

“Oh, yay, that sounds like fun!” Olaf said, hopping up into the sled enthusiastically. “Except the frost part. And the monster part. And the Kristoff-and-Anna-in-danger part.”

Elsa slid next to Olaf and took hold of the reins.

“Sven, take us to Kristoff and Anna. And hurry.”



Sven pulled them away from the castle, retracing his steps. He led them to the outskirts of a farm. But the crops were wilted and blackened from frost. Icicles dripped from the delicate fronds. *But how?* The summer season remained strong. Bright sunlight shone down on the fields.

A farmer came out, looking afraid. He had blond hair and blue eyes and wore stained coveralls and boots. He looked surprised to see the queen there. He quickly bowed his head.

“Your Majesty...”

“What’s causing this ruin?” Elsa asked, indicating the decimated fields.

Fear lit up his eyes. “Your Majesty, it comes in the night. It has bright blue eyes that burn like sapphires. And scraggly stick hands. It comes in the darkness to lay waste to all in its path.”

“Stick hands?” Olaf said, raising his tiny twig hands. His big eyes took on the sheen of worry. But the farmer shook his head.

“Longer and sharper, like daggers,” he said, raising his arms. “And I can’t forget those eyes. How they burned if they caught you in their sights, and how they left the frost scars on my lands.”

Elsa spotted his wife and towheaded kids crowding the window of his quaint thatched-roof cottage. Smoke meandered out of the chimney, bringing aromas of sage and stew.

But they were hiding.

They looked afraid.

The farmer shuddered at the memory, wrapping his arms around his chest despite the warmth kindled in the air, while Sven stamped the ground in emphasis. That meant—this creature was what must have taken Anna and Kristoff.

“A Frost Monster?” Elsa asked, taking it all in.

“Aye,” the farmer said. “A frost demon, if I’ve ever seen one. For what else could it be?”

His question hung in the air. The answer stood before him: the queen herself also wielded the beautiful yet terrible powers of snow and frost. But the farmer didn’t dare give voice to the gossip that was bleeding into Arendelle.

Instead he reached over and patted Sven. “Good boy, keep the queen safe.” His eyes met Elsa’s worried gaze. “Arendelle needs her.”

Sven snorted, and then they were off again. Elsa spied a trail of frost burned into the fields, leading away from the farm and toward the

mountains. She ran her hands through the wilted crops, cradling the melting, fragile ice tendrils encasing their leaves.

She straightened up and spoke to Sven. “Is there where it took them?” she asked, her eyes tracking over the frost trail. “Where does it lead?”

“Oooh, the North Mountain,” Olaf said, raising his little twig arm. “Looks tall and far... and very cold. That’s where I came from.”

“Of course, the one place still in winter’s grasp,” Elsa said, following Olaf’s gesture to the highest peak. Dark, blustery clouds encircled it like a foreboding crown. “Look, there it is,” she said, as the clouds briefly lifted and exposed the exquisite spires of the ice palace she had erected there from magic-driven snow and ice.

“Oh, it’s so pretty,” Olaf said, dancing a little jig under his flurry cloud. “Is that where we’re going?” Then he stopped dancing. “But what if... the Frost Monster lives there?”

“Let’s hope so,” Elsa said as she climbed back into the sled and grabbed the reins. Olaf leaned over and whispered into Sven’s ears.

“*Pssst, think she’s okay?*” he said, glancing at Elsa with grave concern. “I’m not an expert... but usually it’s best to *avoid* monsters....”

But Sven snorted again and whined, seeming to be saying—
Not if it has our friends.



Sven pulled them up the mountain, following the trail and scent of Kristoff and Anna. The temperature dropped precipitously the higher they climbed, and the greenery gave way to sparse shrubbery and hardy pine trees. And then—

“Snow,” Olaf said in awe.

Elsa conjured ice blades so the sled could traverse the snowy trails. Threatening clouds clung to the mountain, blocking out the sun and turning the landscape gray and frigid.

The farther they went, the colder it got. Real flurries started to fall over the mountain. But the cold had never bothered either Elsa or Olaf. This was part of why she had agreed to bring Olaf—she knew he would not be harmed by frost or snow magic.

She’d forgotten how beautiful winter could be when it was this wild and free... the soft patter of fresh snow blanketing and transforming the

landscape into a white wonderland. She found herself falling in love with the frigidity and beauty of it all over again.

But then she shook her head. With great beauty also came great danger. As if hearing her thought, out of nowhere the winds whipped up, changing the snowfall into a blizzard. Elsa, Olaf, and Sven trekked onward, but the wind grew stronger—and the snow hurtled down harder and harder.

Then—

A mournful howl cut through the blinding snow.

Then another and another.

And then the wolves burst through the trees and attacked.

“Run, Sven!” Elsa yelled, twisting the reins.

They took off like a bolt into the storm.

But the wolves were gaining on them.

Elsa tossed the reins to Olaf while she clambered to the back of the sled. She conjured her powers and shot ice out at the wolves, but they skillfully dodged it and kept running.

That was when she saw their eyes.

They glowed like blue sapphires. These were no ordinary wolves. Something had bewitched them—and this whole mountain. The blizzard had stirred up out of nowhere.

But what had done it? And why?

She didn’t have time to think as the wolves lurched closer and nipped at the sled. They seemed immune to her powers. Ice clung to their fur and teeth like a second skin but didn’t appear to bother them. These were ice wolves—and they were gaining on them.

One vicious wolf snapped at her cloak, ripping a shred out of it, while another rammed into the sled, causing it to wobble and almost topple over. Elsa steadied it, then threw some more ice blocks at them. That slowed them down a little but did not stop their chase.

The wolves burst through the ice.

They howled louder, regaining their speed.

“Uh, I don’t want you to worry,” Olaf said, tugging at her cloak. “But—cliff!”

Sven was too spooked by the wolves to slow down, plus there wasn’t space. Even if he stopped running, they’d still slide over the edge and likely plummet to their deaths.

Without thinking, acting on pure instinct, Elsa conjured an ice bridge that arced over the ravine, which Sven careened over. But the wolves raced onto it after them.

They were gaining again.

“Come on, just a little farther,” Elsa murmured, waiting for the perfect moment as Sven cleared the bridge.

Right when the wolves reached the middle of the bridge, she shattered it into a thousand shards. The wolves plummeted into the ravine, landing in the snow with distraught yelps, then dispersing. The magic that was bewitching them also seemed to have evaporated and left them.

But what had caused it?

The only way to find it was to keep going—and reach the palace. With that, they continued onward into the fierce blizzard that threatened to derail their journey.

Finally, they reached the ice palace. The sun was setting through the clouds, casting the last gasps of daylight over the North Mountain. Sven stayed back, while Elsa marched up to her icy creation with Olaf waddling after her through the deep snow.

“So pretty... and scary...” Olaf said, looking amazed at the palace at sunset.

They reached the door. Olaf peered up at it, then back at her.

“Knock... you do know how to knock?” Olaf said in concern, his eyebrows knitting together. “Your sister didn’t know. But don’t tell her I said that....”

Elsa rolled her eyes. “I made it. You don’t have to knock at your own home.”

“Oh, right,” Olaf said. “But what if someone else moved in? You’ve been gone a while.”

Elsa rolled her eyes again. But he had a point.

“Fine.”

She started to rap her knuckles, but then the doors opened of their own accord.

“Uh, that wasn’t creepy,” Olaf said in a tremulous voice, glancing into the dark and shadowy entryway. “Not creepy at all... perfectly *normal* door behavior...”

“Hello... anybody home?” Elsa called out. “Anna... Kristoff...”

Elsa ventured inside with Olaf behind her, but something about the ice palace felt ominous and haunted now. When she had stayed there, the ice glowed with a beautiful magic, but now it cast threatening shadows across the sleek, icy floors. She entered cautiously.

“Hello... anybody here?” she called again.

Her voice echoed out—and then it was answered.

“Elsa... up here!”

It was Anna.

And she sounded afraid. Her voice echoed down the from the top floor.

“Hold on, I’m coming!”

Elsa didn’t wait. She bounded up the steps after the voice. Olaf hurried right behind her on his stumpy legs. Elsa reached the top, then slid to a halt, making Olaf slide into her. Her eyes landed on Anna and Kristoff.

But they were trapped.

They lay imprisoned inside a large cage made entirely from icicles that sprouted out from the ceiling itself. Water—when frozen solid—became extremely strong. They both looked on the verge of unconsciousness, weakened from their prolonged exposure to the cold.

“Hold on, I’ll get you out of there,” Elsa said, rushing over. Her sister stirred weakly in her cage. Her face was pale, while her teeth chattered.

“Anna, who did this to you?”

“Elsa... no... stay back... it’s a trap...” Anna said weakly. “Don’t come up here....”

But her warning came too late.

Suddenly a dark shadow fell over Elsa.

The Frost Monster lurched out.

She stared at the creature in horror. Just as the farmer had said, it had bright sapphire eyes and scraggly, dagger-sharp tree branches for arms. It cracked open its jaws and roared through jagged icicle fangs, emitting a cold blast of wintry air.

“Hey, he looks like me,” Olaf said. “Only like... a *mean* version of me.”

“And he’s bigger,” Elsa said. “Watch out!”

The Frost Monster loomed over them and roared again. The next wave of frosted breath hit Olaf directly, causing him to topple and fall apart. His head rolled away from his body, while his torso collapsed into frantic snowballs that bowled away over the slippery floors.

But Elsa didn't have time to worry. Instead, she summoned her powers and cast ice daggers at the creature—

But to her dismay, they had no effect.

Then, something *worse* happened.

The monster absorbed the ice and snow hurled at it, growing larger and stronger. It roared with newfound strength, emitting another gale of wintry breath that blew Elsa back through the doors and onto the balcony. The icicle cage overhead rocked precipitously, threatening to fall and shatter and take Anna and Kristoff with it. Elsa had to act fast.

The blizzard tore at her while the monster hit her with another frigid blast. She stood up, shielding her face against it all. She tried to fight back with a burst of snow and ice.

But her powers only backfired again, making the creature stronger. *Why don't my powers work on this creature?* she thought frantically. The balcony's sheer drop-off threatened behind her.

One more strong blast—

And it could send her over the edge.

She thought fast and studied the demon's face. Clearly, the creature was... angry. Anna had also mentioned a trap. Had the creature purposely lured her back to the ice palace?

And if so, why?

"What do you want from me?" Elsa tried speaking to it, meeting the creature's sapphire gaze. "Why did you take my sister and friend? Why did you want me to come back here?"

Pain tore over the demon's face. Icy tears rolled down the cheeks. Then it cracked open its jaws, and a shrill, piercing voice emerged. It sounded like a fierce wind whistling through trees.

"You made me... then abandoned me...." the creature spoke. "Summer is a blight on the land.... The light... it burns and melts... and it hurts me.... Bring back winter...."

Elsa stared back in shock.

She'd made this creature?

She couldn't believe it. But how? Had it been during her reign at the ice palace? She glanced over at Olaf, still rolling around and dismembered. But hadn't she accidentally made the snowman from her childhood come alive, too? Frost Monsters lived in stories and fairy tales. Every kid in Arendelle grew up knowing the legends. So of course she could have conjured it.

Now that she thought about it, this creature did resemble Olaf in certain key ways—only a bigger, scarier version that had become possessed with great rage and furious anger.

“But why did you leave me here?” it spoke again, the shrill voice making chills shoot up her spine. “And then bring the great thaw... to destroy me?”

Anger at that memory seemed to overtake the creature as it roared and prepared to attack her again. Of course, that wasn’t why she had left the castle and thawed the lands. But now she realized why the creature would be so angry with her, even if it hadn’t been her intention.

The creature stomped onto the balcony toward her.

Elsa scrambled back, hitting the railing.

She didn’t know what to do. The same magic that animated this terrible, mournful creature came from inside her, and so it only made the creature stronger.

All hope seemed lost.

Anna and Kristoff lay trapped in the cage. They wouldn’t survive much longer, and this monster would continue to ravage the farmlands and terrorize the people of Arendelle.

Nevertheless, she summoned ice powers to her fingertips.

What other choice did she have?

But then, Olaf’s head rolled toward her, still detached from his body. His lips moved. “Elsa, remember what the more powerful force is...” he whispered in a soft voice.

That was it. Elsa stood up and walked toward the creature with open arms. But instead of hitting him with ice, she made her powers go dormant. Her fingertips were harmless now.

“I’m sorry...” she said, taking another tentative step toward her creation.

“Sorry?” it said in surprise.

“I hope you can forgive me,” she went on, taking another step. “I didn’t know I created you—or that I hurt you like that. I didn’t mean it. And I’m very sorry... please forgive me.”

Her heart pulsed with warmth—that was the power of love—for this poor creature whom she’d abandoned and accidentally brought pain upon. The blizzard died down a little, and she could see more clearly now. The

monster's features seemed to soften in that moment and almost melt a little, while the razor-sharp icicles in its jaws retreated into its mouth.

The creature could've easily hurt her sister and Kristoff, but it hadn't. Instead, it had only used them to summon Elsa back to the ice palace. It didn't mean to hurt anyone.

"I'm sorry—and I love you," Elsa said. "Just as I love my sister, Anna... Kristoff... Olaf... Sven..." She ticked them off, feeling her heart pump even stronger with love's warmth. The blood flowed through her veins faster, bringing with it the pure magic of heat and warmth.

And just like that, the monster, which had grown angry and powerful with rage and neglect, began to shrink down as its terrible power melted away, until all that was left was—

A lumpy, harmless snowman.

The blizzard also ceased howling, and the skies cleared, displaying a beautiful, moonlit night. Elsa walked over, running her hands over the snowman's now inanimate face. A refrain of a song that Anna used to sing—*do you want to build a snowman?*—echoed through her head.

She reassembled Olaf, who appeared unharmed. Olaf waddled over to the now docile snowman.

"I think it's missing something..." he mused.

With that, he plucked out his carrot nose and wedged it into the snowman's face. He stood back and peered at it in delight. The nose did make it feel complete now.

"You're right—the finishing touch," Elsa said. "But what about your nose?"

"Plenty of carrots in the sled," Olaf said, then frowned. "Unless Sven got hungry... we'd better go check... not good to leave reindeer unattended around bushels of carrots."

That was Kristoff began to wake from the enchantment. Anna stirred sleepily in the cage overhead, too. "I'm hungry, too.... Hurry up... and get us down from here...."

Elsa cracked a smile at her sister.

"Always thinking with your stomach?"

But then she worked quickly to free Anna and Kristoff from the ice cage. With Olaf's help, they climbed into the back of the sled. Elsa wrapped them in thick woolen blankets. Then she climbed back into the sled and seized the reins as Olaf hopped in next to her.

“Sven, take us home,” Elsa said in relief. “You know the way.”

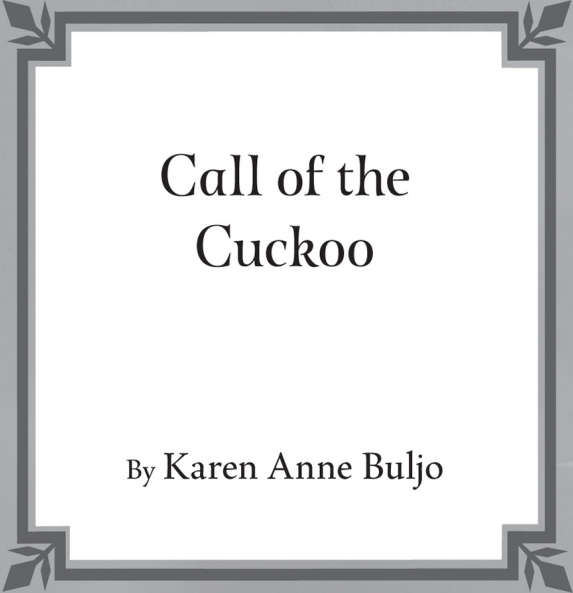
As they rocketed off across the snow and careened down the mountain, Elsa glanced back one last time at the ice palace—and realized something important. This place no longer held any pull over her; it was as if a powerful spell had been broken. Now, it felt forlorn and lonely.

That was because—it wasn’t her home.

Sven pulled them down the mountain and back toward the castle, where they could all rest and recover. They soon left the North Mountain—and winter’s frigid grasp—far behind them, as the snow receded and they emerged into the blast of light from a new morning.

After that fateful day, the Frost Monster no longer ravaged the farmlands, nor threatened the vital harvest. Before she left her winter palace, Elsa summoned her powers and conjured a soft arctic wind to disperse the snowman. Gently and naturally, it transformed into snowflakes that fluttered through the air magically like icy diamonds and blew out the window, where they refracted the brilliant rays of the dawn sunlight, returning to the wild where they belonged. Thus, the peaceful balance was restored, just as it should be. Meanwhile, Anna and Kristoff returned to full health, with no permanent injuries and very little recollection of their icy imprisonment.

Soon a great bounty bloomed and ripened in the fields, untouched by winter or frost. Summer continued to bring warmth and life to the land, while Elsa ruled over the great kingdom of Arendelle, having learned, once again, that love was indeed the strongest magic of all.



Call of the Cuckoo

By Karen Anne Buljo



Deep in the forest far past Arendelle, where a large castle was being built, sat a camp made up of tents, campfires, and herds of reindeer. It was the home of the Northuldra, a group of people who were one with nature, who were the people of the sun, and who were the people that followed wherever their reindeer roamed.

As the sun slowly began to sink, setting the leaves of the fall trees ablaze with light, children gathered around the biggest campfire at the knees of a man. It was story time in the Northuldra camp, and the man's deep baritone voice was known for keeping all the listeners enthralled. He held up his hands, and the friendly chatter began to quiet. It was then he began his story.

Along the banks of a rushing stream, a sky boy named Clemet sat with his grandfather, Henry, a fishing pole held tightly in his small hand. The two of them were from a tiny village named Aljel, which was close to the kingdom of Arendelle, and they loved spending time together in the forest. Many sounds surrounded them, but louder than all the others was a bird's cry. "Grandpa, what's that?" the little boy asked, worry in his dark eyes.

At the end of his grandpa's pole, a fish jerked against the line, trying to get away. With a quick flick of his wrist, Henry pulled the fish in as he answered the question. "That, my child, is a cuckoo. Whenever you hear one call, you can wish for three things."

Clemet looked around, trying to spy the bird, wondering if such a magical creature really existed. Henry smiled at him as if he was happy to be sharing a big secret. The family dog lay next to them. Clemet scooched forward and hugged him around his neck. Still, he saw nothing in the trees. He just heard the sounds. "Are you sure, Grandpa?" he asked.

Henry calmly took the fish off his line and leaned his fishing pole against a tree as he looked lovingly at his grandson. “I am sure, Clemet. Make a wish for anything you want.”

Sitting down next to Clemet, Henry softly stroked his dark curly hair. “But how do you know it works?” the little boy asked, still feeling uncertain.

Henry put his arm around Clemet’s shoulders and gave him a hug. “You see, when I was your age, my grandfather told me a secret.”

Clemet smiled. “You mean my great-grandfather?”

“No, my child, your great-great-grandfather. And his name was Clemet, too.”

The little boy couldn’t believe his ears. “Just like me?”

Grandpa smiled and nodded slowly. “You are named after him. I was on a fishing trip with him, just like this one, when I heard a cuckoo sing. He told me to wish three things for myself.”

The little boy wanted to know what his grandpa had wished for, and whether those wishes had come true or not. Henry explained that the wishes that you wished on the cuckoo were secret—you must not tell them to anyone. Clemet’s face fell and Grandpa could tell he was disappointed. He patted his grandson on the head and said, “But everything came true, my child. Everything came true.”

A yellow-beaked, brown-feathered cuckoo flew over them and landed on a tree, singing its happy song. Grandpa and the little boy were fascinated by the bird that promised to grant all the wishes from the forest. “Now it’s your turn to make three wishes. Not too loud. Close your eyes, my child, and give it a go.”

The little boy’s dark eyes snapped shut and he began to whisper into the wind, quietly so his grandfather couldn’t hear him: “Please give me a dog for my very own, a silver coin on a chain, and true love.”

At that exact moment, the cuckoo took off into the sky as if it had heard the wishes. It circled around them in the air, as though in their honor, before flying away.

...

Years went by, and Clemet grew up to be a handsome young man. And over time he found that the wishes that he had whispered to the cuckoo were coming true. First, he got his own dog that followed him everywhere he went. He named her Tinka. They even slept in the forest together whenever they were out exploring. She was very special to him, and special in general. His people, the Aljel, said that Tinka was a “four-eyed dog.” That meant that she could see more than other dogs—she could even see spirits and warn Clemet when they were near.

Next, Clemet received his silver coin on a chain, which he always kept around his neck. It was well known from his people in Aljel that it would serve as protection against the spirits—the silver metal blinded them.

The coin was also special to the Northuldra people. The elders said that if you were a young sky-people man who was lucky enough to meet a girl from the Northuldra people, then you could throw your silver coin over her to win her love, but you needed to be careful. Very careful. After you did that, you would need to marry her.

The young man and his beloved tan-and-white Tinka had been walking through the forest for what felt like ages. Finding the perfect spot for a break, Clemet sat and drank from his cup while he stroked the dog lovingly. “You know, it was somewhere around here that I heard the cuckoo and wished for a dog for myself, and here you are, my four-eyed best friend. Tinka, I love you.”

The dog licked her owner’s hand as if to say that she loved him, too. Feeling himself in a very good mood, Clemet stood and took a stick from the ground. Looking at Tinka with a smile, he threw the stick as far as he could.

“Come on, now. Go get it and bring it back to me.”

But Tinka grabbed the stick and ran away from him instead of to him. With a laugh, Clemet ran after her. He tried many times to grab the stick, but the dog would not let it go that easily.

Out of breath but happy, Clemet lay down on the ground and looked up at the sky, watching the clouds move slowly. “I give up, Tinka. You win,” he declared as he listened to the leaves rustle and the birds sing.

There was a sudden silence in the forest. Frowning, Clemet sat up and looked around. Tinka sat nearby, still with the stick in her mouth. He could see that she was also listening, her head tilted to the side.

Then the sound of laughter floated around them on the breeze. Tinka stood up. They both looked at each other, wondering if the other had heard it. "It's so quiet, so quiet," said Clemet to himself.

Suddenly a stick sailed through the air. And Tinka couldn't just stand still. Her tongue lolling out of her mouth as she dropped her own stick, she ran to retrieve the new one and started playing with it. Clemet was confused. *Where did the stick come from?* He shouted into the air, "Come here so I can see you."

But no one answered his call. All he could hear was a child laughing. Curious, Clemet ran after his dog, trying to see who it was. But Tinka soon returned to him and now had a good grip on the stick. She tried to play with Clemet, but he wasn't in the mood, the invisible laughter on his mind. "Tinka, not now. Do you hear?"

But the dog still wanted to play and ran away with the stick. Clemet called after her, not wanting her to leave his side. The laughter came again and he turned toward the voice. He could see a silhouette, a little boy, but the child ran so fast that Clemet had no chance to catch up. Now when Clemet looked around, he realized that he was lost.

He could hear something rustling in the bushes, but then he saw it posed no danger. It was only a female fox with her kits. The fox was scurrying around, trying to get her babies deeper into the forest. "Oh, mummy fox, I wish you could tell me if you saw something—" he started.

But before he finished the sentence, a new stick flew by him. Clemet took off in the direction that it had come from in pursuit of the child, whom he could finally see more clearly. The little boy had dark hair, and a big smile crossed his face.

"Hey, you. Come back here!" Clemet called after him.

But the boy, Fally, ran quickly. In fact, in his language, his name meant "fast runner." Fally knew he could easily outrun the young sky man and escape to the Northuldra village. When he tried to open the way, though, he couldn't remember the key words. "Skång-skång-lay," said the little Northuldra boy, but nothing happened.

CleMET was now very close by, but he couldn't see as clearly in the forest as Fally and the Northuldra could. CleMET tried to grab for him, but Fally skirted away, and CleMET fell. When CleMET got up from the ground, he was irritated. He started walking. But in the chaotic situation, he didn't notice that his silver coin had fallen from around his neck. "Oh, that boy... just wait and see, I'll find you."

Then CleMET heard something else. He bent down. "All right, let's see now," he said as he lay down by some bushes, trying to hide himself.

But he saw only the hats of three people. He realized that in order to see better, he would have to stand up. And when he did, he could hardly believe what was before his eyes—it took his breath away. "Northuldra. Oh my gosh," he whispered to himself as he saw the three women—one old and two young.

The one with long black hair, Lejla, took his breath away. She had a red scarf with flowers on it draped around her neck, and she held a wooden walking stick. Without warning, Fally ran up to the women, and Lejla's sister, Ristin, clapped her hands in surprise. "What are you doing out here alone?" she asked.

Biret, the oldest of the three women, leaned on her own walking stick and wiped sweat off her forehead. "Now, Fally, do you want to tell us?"

"I'm sorry, but I ran really fast, and he couldn't reach me," answered the boy as he stared at the ground. His face was red, but whether it was from exertion or shame was anybody's guess.

Lejla glanced around at the trees of the forest surrounding them, but she didn't see anyone. She wondered who Fally was talking about. Ristin gave the little boy a hug. "I can't even think about losing you."

Their mother shook her head. She looked at Fally with love in her eyes. Kicking a rock almost bashfully, Fally told them that he couldn't remember the key words to get back inside the Northuldra village. "Listen, child, we will always let you in, but promise me that next time you will ask me first, because you know the rules. Don't you?"

Fally nodded. "You have to use the key words. You shouldn't go to the sky people's world without an adult with you. If you go out too many times, you will lose your memory of the Northuldra."

Biret saw that Fally was really sorry for what he had done, and he promised not to do it again. She placed her hand on his head as if to say he was forgiven for his mistake. Then she looked around carefully to make sure they were alone before she raised her wooden walking stick and said the key words: “Skongally, skongally, please let the Northuldra in.”

The sun shone down through a parting in the trees, illuminating a path that hadn’t been apparent before. “Don’t you stand there, boy. Go home now!”

Fally gave the older Northuldra woman a big smile and then disappeared down the path. Lejla shook her head before voicing her concern about how Fally had gotten out of the Northuldra village. The older woman looked toward the opening and shook her head.

“I don’t know, but we need to talk with him,” she said.

CleMET saw and heard everything from his hiding place in the bushes. He couldn’t believe his eyes as the women walked away from the sunlit path and it disappeared into the darkness of the underbrush.

• • •

Not long after, Ristin, Lejla, and their mother, Biret, followed a very old, difficult path strewn with roots and stones. The two young women played and laughed, teasing each other as they continued on their journey. The older woman stopped by a beautiful lake fed by waterfalls and looked around. “Girls, girls, take it easy now,” she said, and waved in the air with her walking stick.

Lejla began to dance happily while her sister Ristin squealed. They were thrilled to be out in the land of the people of the sky. The two of them held hands and ran among the trees on the banks of the lake. Biret looked at her beautiful daughters and smiled, feeling the love for them flood her heart.

“Can we swim now?” Lejla asked her mother, and Ristin nodded her head in agreement.

“That’s fine, but not so long this time. Remember to rinse your hair, girls,” the older woman instructed.

That night was when the midnight sun turned over to autumn, so to keep their vibrant hair color, according to legend, all the daughters of the Northuldra needed to rinse their hair in waterfalls. The young women shed some of their outer layers of clothing while the older Northuldra woman sat down on a rock by the water. She took her wooden cup off her belt and scooped up the water from the waterfalls to have a drink. She relaxed to the sound of her daughters' laughter and splashing while she looked up to the sky and saw clouds shaped as hearts.

• • •

Hidden nearby behind some bushes was Clemet. He watched the two sisters play in the water, and he felt something that surprised him when he looked at Lejla. Somehow and in some way, he had fallen in love.

The older woman shivered, feeling a sensation wash over her skin. What it was she didn't know, but it was enough to worry her. A sense of urgency gripping her, she called out, "Ristin, Lejla, come here a moment."

Lejla swam to her mother and came out of the water. Her long black hair was shining. She stepped up and wrung the water from it. Clemet felt his breath escape him. There was just something about this young woman that he found utterly mesmerizing. With nary a moment's thought, he decided to throw his silver coin over her as he heard the elders' advice ringing in his ears. His grandfather's words came through loud and clear in his memory: *If you see a Northuldra girl, and you fall in love, then you must use your silver coin to get her to love you in return.*

Clemet reached to his neck to grab his silver coin, but all his hand found was an empty spot where it used to be. His heart began to race, and he felt panic take hold of him. *Where has it gone?*

"Girls, I don't feel safe here," the older woman said. "Go on and rinse your hair as well as you can and we will go."

Even though they still wanted to swim, Lejla and Ristin heard something in their mother's tone and didn't argue. They finished with their hair, and just as Lejla moved to emerge from the water, she

turned her face to the bushes where Clemet hid. But she didn't see anything.

It was as if she had been staring straight into his heart. Clemet was sold. He needed to follow the old ones' advice, but with the loss of his silver coin, what could he do? He found himself wishing for the beautiful melody of the cuckoo so he could make more wishes. But alas, there were no bird sounds to be had. Instead, he simply closed his eyes and whispered to himself, "Please don't go away. Please let me get to know you, Lejla."

A sudden happy barking made his eyes fly open. Tinka had found him, but she had also revealed his hiding place. All three women turned and stared, finally seeing the young man. "Hurry," Biret urged as her daughters quickly threw on their outer clothes.

Tinka was happy to see Clemet, but Clemet was frustrated and angry at the dog for giving him away. She tried to jump up on him and lick his face, but he didn't have time for her antics. He needed to get to Lejla. But by the time he could escape from Tinka, there was no one left at the water.

Clemet felt his heart sink, and he pushed Tinka away when she prodded him with a stick. "Not now," he grouched, stepping back from her, no longer in a playful mood.

He hoped to catch any glimpse, any sign, of where the three women had gone. But it was almost like they had vanished into thin air. Clemet, frustrated, finally took Tinka's stick and threw it as far out into the water of the lake as he could.

Where did they go?

Confused and unhappy, he sat down on the rocks by the water. It was then that a big stick caught his eye. It was lying at the ground near his feet. Taking it in hand, he frowned and then looked at it more closely. Then he suddenly realized—it was a Northuldra walking stick!

With a happy bark, Tinka emerged from the lake and wanted to trade the stick she'd retrieved for the one he was holding. "Behave yourself now," he scolded the dog.

Along the stick he felt something, and he turned it to investigate. There were letters carved into the wood: ALJEL. Clemet didn't understand why the name of his town was written on a Northuldra

walking stick. There were other letters, too, but they made no sense to him.

Standing up with the walking stick in his grasp, he saw something else on the ground that had been left behind—a beautiful handmade wooden cup. Clemet picked up the cup and examined it. With one last look around the area, he decided to return home, taking the two found items with him.

• • •

Clemet's grandparents were older now, and they still lived out in the forest in the tiny house where they'd lived their whole lives. As Clemet walked down the path, he saw his grandpa outside fixing the fence. When the older man heard Tinka barking, he stood up and waved to them. Tinka ran happily to Grandpa, who stroked her lovingly and laughed. "Oh, you wish to play, do you?"

Clemet looked at them with a smile. But then he sighed as his eyes traveled back to the forest, back the way he had come. He couldn't help wondering if he would see Lejla again.

His grandmother, Eleha, opened the window of the small cottage. "Clemet! Clemet! So nice to see you. How are you, child?"

Clemet loved his grandparents a lot, and he was really happy to see his grandma. He went to her and gave her a big hug as she came out of the house with a pitcher of juice in her hands. "Good to see you, too, Grandma. I'm fine."

But she noticed that her grandson was not smiling. "Did Grandpa say something to you, child?" she asked, concern on her face. "Don't listen to what he tells you. He is an old, silly guy now."

As Clemet looked over to where Henry and Tinka were playing, he told her that his grandpa had nothing to do with his bad mood. Eleha shook her head and laughed. "Look at them. He loves that dog as much as he loved his own dog."

Tinka turned and started to bark at the forest. But none of them could see what she was fussing at. "Lie down," Clemet called to her. "It's enough now."

But at the same time, Clemet tried to see something at the forest line, wishing a certain young woman would suddenly, yet impossibly, appear.

Eleha led them to the outdoor table, where they all sat around and begin to sip juice. No one spoke as they listened to the sounds of the forest. Henry looked over at Clemet and said, “You can tell us, you know.”

Clemet’s grandparents were so focused on him and what was upsetting him that nobody seemed to notice Tinka. She was now playing with the Northuldra’s walking stick.

Clemet hesitated, but then he said, “Let me show you something. I found it in the forest.”

He took out the cup—the one he had found by the rocks of the waterfall. Eleha put on her glasses while Clemet held the cup up so she could see it better.

Henry became serious. He took his glasses off and looked at his grandson. Grandma came over to her husband and stood behind his chair, placing her hand on his shoulders as the smile faded from her face. “My child, you need to return the cup. It belongs to the people of the sun.”

“She was so beautiful,” Clemet said.

Grandpa frowned. “What are you talking about? Who was beautiful?”

“I don’t like this at all. Not at all,” said Grandma. She was really worried for her grandson.

Then Clemet told them about Lejla. How beautiful she was, and how she had been out swimming with her sister.

The grandparents looked at each other, worry in their eyes. Then his grandfather stood up and spoke loudly. “Listen, you need to return the Northuldra cup back to exactly where you found it. Whoever it belongs to will die if it is not returned.”

Grandpa’s raised voice brought Tinka over with the walking stick in her mouth. But still, no one paid the dog any attention. “Why didn’t you use your silver coin? Where is it, by the way?” he asked, his hands tightly clenched on the tabletop.

Clemet touched the empty spot on his neck and said that he must have dropped it somewhere. Tinka nudged Clemet, trying to get his attention. Finally, he noticed what she was playing with and immediately tried to take it from her. But it wasn't as easy as he expected. Eleha found another stick and threw it for the dog. Tinka dropped the walking stick and went after the new piece of wood.

Henry picked up the walking stick before Tinka could return and looked at it carefully. Clemet told them that he had tried to read the words on the stick. "No, you couldn't because this is the Northuldra's language," Grandma said to him. "The only way you can read it properly is by looking at it in a mirror."

Clemet frowned, thinking it was strange that she knew about it, but she didn't explain.

At that moment, Eleha took off her necklace made of reindeer horn and hung the amulet around her grandson's neck. Clemet opened his mouth to say something, but his grandmother shook her head as a sign that it was not the time for questions.

Clemet nodded, somehow knowing he was going to get no more information from his grandparents. "Tinka, come here! Let's go, girl." With that, Tinka and Clemet started back to the forest to return the two items they had found.

...

At home with her daughters, Biret was shaken up, but she didn't want Lejla and Ristin to be upset. She asked them to not show how shaken they were so they wouldn't scare the children in the village. "I feel much better now, Mother," said Ristin. "We are home and we are safe."

The three women held hands as they walked by some of the children of their village, who sat around and sang a beautiful song about seven blackbirds drinking water. They clapped their hands in rhythm and sang together in that happy, disjointed way that all children do. Nearby, some of the adults listened to the song as they continued about their daily lives, feeling the magic of the word *seven*.

Biret just didn't understand why that young man had been so deep in the forest and far away from any of the villages of the sky people.

She knew for a fact that water had a very good memory, and it didn't seem that any of the waters she had encountered remembered the young man of the sky people who had been watching them. She even said as much to her daughters as they continued through the Northuldra camp. Lejla and Ristin didn't answer, but Ristin tugged on Lejla and whispered to her, "Oh my gosh, he was so handsome, and he kept staring at you. I think he likes you."

Lejla didn't find her sister's words funny. "No, he does not!"

Now Ristin started teasing her sister. "Oh, yes, he does!"

Biret shook her head at their arguing. At least they were home now. It felt so good. She took a look over the Northuldra village. The tents that they lived in were called lavvoes, and they clustered throughout the camp, declaring it home. The crackling campfires added to the coziness, and the herds of reindeer stamped and snorted.

Some young people were having fun, playing and singing "Turn on the Ring." The game was about how to get the right person to be your sweetheart. Lejla and Ristin, still bickering, joined them. One of their friends greeted them. "You are back home! Come play with us."

Their mother joined them, too. She wanted her people to listen as she began to warn them about the sky man they had encountered.

Fally quickly came up to the group as well. He told the story, as fast as he ran, of the sky man he had met—and how he had secretly left the village again to follow him. "He watched them swimming at the sky people's waterfalls, and he took a Northuldra walking stick."

The village people murmured in shock.

Fally also told them that the young man from the sky people had been about to throw his silver coin over Lejla.

"It's good that didn't happen. Otherwise, we would lose our dear Lejla," said the old Northuldra man. "She would have had to live with the sky people forever."

Biret turned to Fally with a frown. "It all started when you ran away."

Fally hung his head, feeling guilty. He promised that he would never do it again. Not ever. Suddenly, he remembered something that he thought might make the village forgive him. "I know where the sky

person's silver coin is. He dropped it." He mentioned it was right outside of the forest path.

The older Northuldra woman wanted to know if Fally had seen her cup with the missing walking stick, too. Fally nodded. "The man had both of them. He found them by the waterfall."

Biret considered this. "Then we will see whether he comes to give them back. If he does, we will know he is a friend."

• • •

With his grandparents' words ringing in his ears, Clemet returned to where he had seen Lejla. With the cup in one hand and the walking stick in the other, he moved around the lake, hoping to see some sign of Lejla and her family. His walk had been a long one, and he decided to use the cup to get a drink of the clear water from the waterfall. But when he stood up, it seemed that the forest was cast in a different light and looked much clearer. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the young boy who had been throwing sticks for Tinka. He was almost hidden behind a bush. "Hello, boy, you can come out now. I see you," Clemet called.

Even though the sunlight was changing, the midnight sun was rising, and Clemet could clearly see the forest. Fally took a few steps out from the bushes. "That cup doesn't belong to you. If you want to see her, you better bring the cup back to the Northuldra," he said.

"See who?"

"The girl you were staring at," Fally answered.

Clemet ignored his answer. "Who are you, boy?"

"I am your neighbor. My name is Fally," he said with a smile.

Clemet frowned. It seemed odd that a young boy was alone in the forest. Was it possible that he was Northuldra, like the women he had seen?

"I live here," Fally explained. "I want you to come to my home village with me." Fally told him that they had to hurry up now, because of the time of the midnight sun.

Clemet shielded his eyes from it as he asked, "Why is it shining so bright? It almost hurts."

Fally explained that the Northuldra people used special sunglasses in emergencies like this—sunglasses made from reindeer bones. “You can take mine, but we need to hurry now.”

Putting the sunglasses on, Clemet was grateful. “I live near Arendelle. A little place named Aljel.”

Fally didn’t answer. He just started moving through the trees and waving at Clemet to follow him.

“I saw them, you know, the Northuldra,” Clemet admitted, feeling warm.

When they stopped, Clemet took off the sunglasses and recognized the area from earlier in the day where he had seen the sunlit path. He was confused. “Tell me, now, where are you from?”

The boy explained that they had arrived at his home. Clemet started laughing. “Out here? We are nowhere. Are you serious?”

But Fally stared at him without answering the question. Instead he asked Clemet if he knew the words that the older Northuldra woman had spoken that morning.

“Yes, I heard the words. But why would I use them?” Clemet asked.

Fally tapped his foot on the ground in irritation. “Well, sky boy. It’s up to you. Do you or do you not want to see Lejla again?”

Clemet startled, then quickly repeated the words he had heard the older Northuldra woman say: “Skongally, skongally, please let the Northuldra in!”

Out of the shadows, a path of light slowly appeared. Fally cheered and started to happily run along it. But seeing Clemet standing in one place, Fally ran back and took Clemet’s hand to pull him along. Together, they walked toward the village in the distance.

• • •

Northuldra children surrounded them, laughing in a melodic way.

“Look, look, a sky boy inside our village, and his eyes are searching for the beautiful Lejla.” They took turns running around Clemet and teasing him. Fally shooed them away.

But Clemet paid them no mind. He looked around the village in awe. “Oh my gosh, your village is Northuldra. You are Northuldra.

This place is amazing.”

A young man with brown hair and a big smile approached. “You are so welcome here, neighbor. My name is Aimo.” He shook hands with Clemet. “Let me show you around.”

He motioned for Clemet to follow him. The two young men started walking across the Northuldra village. The first person they saw was an old woman who looked like she was playing a game with her fingers—a game that created shadows. Clemet was filled with curiosity about what she was doing.

“She is our oldest, and she is teaching the young ones how to get bad spirits out from our village,” Aimo explained. “Don’t worry about her. Come on.”

On the other side of the village, Lejla watched them from her family’s tent. As the two walked toward her, she ducked inside, the butterflies in her stomach fluttering nonstop. She couldn’t help herself. “Sky boy, sky boy, why is my heart beating so fast when I see you?” she muttered under her breath.

Finally Clemet and his guide arrived at the big tent. Clemet noticed smoke curling up into the sky from a pipe that came out of the top of the roof. “Someone is home,” Aimo said.

Clemet felt a bit apprehensive. He looked around for Fally, feeling as if the little boy would help calm his nerves now as he had earlier. “Who lives here?” Clemet asked, although he was sure he already knew the answer.

Biret emerged from the tent with a much younger woman by her side. The young woman took one look at Clemet and stepped forward with a smile. Clemet recognized her immediately. “That’s Ristin,” Aimo said softly.

“Well, sky boy, we are impressed. What do your people call you, and what brings you here?” Ristin asked him.

Clemet looked at Aimo, who nudged him with his elbow. At the encouragement, Clemet took a step forward and cleared his throat. “No particular reason. I was nearby and thought I’d like to visit you.”

Aimo added, “Fally brought him here, and see what he carries?”

Ristin looked to the walking stick and nodded. “And what do your people call you?”

Clemet told her his name, and the history behind it, and then, looking guilty, he offered the walking stick to the older Northuldra woman. "I'm so sorry I took it," he apologized, his chin down to his chest and his hands clasped in front of him. "I didn't realize it belonged to you."

She held the walking stick lightly in her hands and then passed it back to Clemet. Not understanding what was happening, the young man took it.

"Please read the letters you see on it," she said.

Clemet glanced from Biret to Aimo to Ristin, not sure why they were asking him to do that. But Ristin requested that he give it a try. "A-L-J-E-L," he read aloud, again wondering why it spelled out the name of his city.

Biret and Ristin shared a knowing smile. He looked at the two Northuldra women as if waiting for an answer. "We always put our names on our belongings," Ristin explained. "But we write our words backward. So that stick belongs to my sister, Lejla."

Clemet stared at Ristin in dumbfounded silence. "I will go get her," Aimo offered.

But the older Northuldra woman held up her hand. "I will do it. She is my daughter."

Ristin asked the two young men to sit down with her at the campfire and wait while Lejla was brought to them. Northuldra children were playing around and singing the song about seven beautiful blackbirds drinking water. Clemet asked about their song, which was unfamiliar to him.

Ristin explained that the number seven was a powerful number for the Northuldra people. And if one of the sky people like Clemet wanted to marry one of the Northuldra, they needed to wash their face with seven kinds of water.

Clemet didn't understand. But then Ristin got up and spread her arms to encompass the nature all around them. "What do you see?" she asked.

Clemet stood and didn't say a word, because walking toward him were Biret and Lejla. The children stopped playing and the Northuldra people followed the two women as if they were following their leader.

But the only thing Clemet noticed was Lejla. He was utterly enchanted. Half of her face was hidden behind a curtain of her ebony hair.

“Listen, Northuldra, his name is Clemet. He is named after his great-great-grandfather. He found my daughter’s walking stick, and he was able to spell her name in our language. You all know what that means. Don’t you?”

It felt as if every eye in the village was on Clemet. Ristin smiled, seeming to be satisfied. The older Northuldra woman started to sing, and slowly everyone joined her. Together, with their hands touching the shoulder of the person next to them, they formed a ring. “What are they singing?” Clemet asked.

“A blessing song,” Ristin responded. “The words talk about how Lejla came from a cuckoo’s dream. A sky boy came and found her walking stick. Our beautiful Northuldra daughter. Her song is the cuckoo’s cry that tells that the people of the sun love their daughter so much that they want to give her wings to fly.”

Then the singing stopped and the Northuldra moved apart to create space in the ring. Not sure what to do, Clemet looked at Aimo, who gestured to him to move forward. And so the son of the sky people moved into their circle and stood there, holding the walking stick.

Ristin motioned for Lejla, and the two women joined him in the circle. Ristin then took the walking stick and held it up. “Now you can tell us, Clemet. What do you see?”

But Clemet only had eyes for Lejla. “I see the most beautiful...”

The children started laughing. But Biret smiled and said, “No, children, not now.”

Forgetting her shyness, Lejla stepped forward to Clemet. “They mean, you have to read the words on the walking stick.”

Clemet cleared his throat and he read, “Northuldra, Biret...”

The children laughed again. But everyone was friendly. Lejla smiled as she put her finger on the walking stick. “Not those names... but this one.”

Clemet looked at her. “Lejla.”

Children began to yell over one another.

“What?”

“What does the sky man say?”

“We can’t hear you!”

Clemet said it louder this time, with laughter in his voice. “Lejla. Lejla is her name.”

The Northuldra people cheered. “Thank you for getting it back for me,” Lejla said.

Clemet could tell by looking in her eyes that she was grateful. He was about to give the walking stick to her, but the older Northuldra woman wanted him to read the letters of Lejla’s name in the sky people’s language. “Aljel. It’s Aljel...” he started. “The name of my hometown. How can it be?”

Ristin gave him a hug. “Nothing is strange, sky boy. We believe in destiny.”

...

Later as they all sat around the campfire together, Aimo was busy searching for something. “What are you looking for?” Clemet asked.

“Biret’s cup. If she cannot find it, she cannot drink, and if she doesn’t drink, she will die,” Aimo explained.

Fally immediately pointed at Clemet. “He has it. I saw him drinking from it by the waterfalls.”

Clemet nodded. He told the others where he had found it. “I’m sorry. I forgot all about it when I was returning the walking stick.”

Clemet walked over to Biret and held out the cup. She took it in her hand and gave a big smile when she saw her name carved into it. Grateful for its return, she made him an offer. “What can I do for you, Clemet, son of the sky people?”

Clemet looked back at Lejla, who was staring at him. “It’s such a pleasure for me to be here. Perhaps you would let me know your daughter a bit better?”

Biret and the older Northuldra women were smiling. “Thank you for not using your silver coin against us,” the woman says. “Clearly you didn’t need to. I think Lejla likes you just fine.”

Then Biret saw the amulet that Clemet had around his neck. She motioned to him, and he took it off, handing it to her as he told her that

it belonged to his beloved grandmother. “I would like you to meet my grandparents, Lejla,” he said quickly.

The Northuldra village became quiet. Biret looked at the young couple as she held the amulet in her hand.

“It is Eleha’s amulet you wear,” Biret confirmed. “I knew her well, once.”

• • •

In the clearing near where the path to the Northuldra village appeared, Clemet’s grandparents, with Tinka by their side, searched around for him. Tinka whined and barked, but there was nothing there. All of a sudden, Grandpa saw the glint of something flashing in the light of the midnight sun. “Look,” he said as he bent down. “It’s Clemet’s silver coin.”

“He has my amulet,” Eleha responded, patting Henry on the arm. “He is protected, and he is in love. Don’t you worry about a thing.”

Suddenly a wooden stick flew through the air. Tinka immediately ran after it, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. “Is that you, Clemet?” Grandpa called out.

But there was no answer—just the voice of a child laughing loud and happy. Out of the bushes ran a young boy with black hair and a big smile on his face. Eleha could hardly believe her eyes. The boy ran faster than Tinka. And he carried something in his hands. “What do you have there?” asked Eleha.

Fally’s fingers uncurled to show an amulet made from reindeer bones.

“I think that the amulet belongs to me. Where did you get it?” Eleha continued.

The boy told them that Clemet had given it to him because he was a fast runner and was able to bring a message.

“Message? What do you mean?” Henry asked, confused.

But before Fally could answer, Eleha took the amulet and held it lovingly. “The message is clear,” she said. “He sent the amulet back to us. He is planning to stay there, with the Northuldra. Isn’t that so?”

Fally nodded, hugging Tinka around her neck. Henry sighed. He had been worried that something like that would happen. He patted the dog on her head. “It’s okay, Tinka. You can go to your owner. Go and find Clemet.”

Then he took his wife’s hand and they waved goodbye to Fally and Tinka. It was hard for them, but they were pleased to know that Clemet was doing fine and was happy with his Lejla.

When the man finished his tale, the group was silent—the only sounds the crackling of the fire. “I can’t believe he left his family behind to live with Lejla,” one young girl said loudly.

“You wouldn’t do anything you could to be with someone you loved?” the man asked.

“I love the forest and the reindeer and my family. I don’t think I could love anyone as much as all of them,” she responded.

“You may change your mind when you get older, Iduna,” he said with a quick pat to her head.



The Next Right Things

By Tiffany Schmidt



*You're Invited to
Berit's 10th Birthday*

Date: March 16

Time: 11 a.m.

Place: 46 Agder Street, Arendelle

Dear Queen Anna,

Please come to my party. We just moved to Arendelle and I don't have any friends. I'm scared no one will come. My mom says you're too busy, but I've heard you're really nice.

*From,
Berit*

“Oh!” Anna rubbed the sleep from her eyes and looked around her bedchamber at the people anxiously waiting for her to wake up. She was sleeping in the same carved wooden bed she’d had since she was a little girl, sporting the same tangled bed head. She wiped her face: the same line of drool, too. “Um, good morning.”

Anna wasn’t a little girl anymore. She was the *queen* of Arendelle. She had been for a few months now, since her sister, Elsa, moved to the Enchanted Forest to bring balance to the spirits of nature.

Sometimes that idea still baffled her.

Anna didn’t have time to be baffled, though, because Kai, the castle steward, was holding a tray of papers. The cook, Olina, held a tray of breakfast treats. Though, judging by the worried expression Gerda, her lady’s maid, wore, Anna didn’t have time for Olina’s famous hot chocolate or steaming chocolate porridge. She probably needed to prioritize unsnarling her copper hair and putting on the purple gown with teal rosemaling Gerda had draped over her arm.

Kai cleared his throat. “Good morning, Your Majesty. Did you hear me go over the day’s events? Or should I begin again?”

Oh. So apparently this wasn't her first wake-up call. Anna yawned and sat up straighter. She was *not* a morning person—but she was trying. It felt like something a queen should do: greet the day cheerfully and be up and at 'em, et cetera.

Elsa had been great at that when she ruled Arendelle. She'd be halfway through her to-do list before the sun was halfway up the sky.

The only thing Anna ever accomplished before breakfast was an epic case of bed head.

But different scenes for different queens! She and Elsa had their own ways of doing things. Anna liked to be awake when the sky was, when the Northern Lights painted a symphony of colors over the stars. Since she was now queen—and doing it well was exhausting—shouldn't she get to sleep in occasionally?

"Nope," she said in answer to her own question as well as Kai's, because if she was running late, she was probably making all of *them* late, too. They worked hard to make Arendelle the wonderful place it was; delaying them was definitely not queenly behavior. She stifled another yawn. "The schedule. I've got it. Great. Don't let me keep you. I'm on it."

Kai looked a little dubious but nodded. "Very good, Your Majesty. I'll set this tray on your desk."

"Wait." She pointed to a red piece of paper that stood out among the white envelopes and formal documents on his tray. "What's that?"

Queen Anna was written at the top in careful lopsided print.

"It came with the mail, Your Majesty, from a village child." Kai handed it to her.

"It's an invitation!" Anna sat up more fully, grinning as she read.

"To a child's party," said Kai. "I'll draft a letter wishing her a joyous birthday and expressing your regrets."

"What? No. I have to go." She crushed the invitation to her chest, remembering all her own birthdays after the castle gates had been shut when she was five. On every birthday candle, she'd wished for friends. Anna couldn't let that happen to Berit. "*I have to.*"

"But your schedule—" said Gerda.

"I've got it right here." Anna swiped a lock of hair out of her face so she could tap her forehead. "It's going to be a great day. Thanks!"

Kai hesitated at the door, with Gerda and Olina pausing behind him. "Are you sure we cannot be of more help, Your Majesty?"

“We’re happy to assist in any way we can,” added Gerda.

Olina nodded. “We’re worried you’ve overcommitted.”

Anna straightened her shoulders. She could do this. Sure, there were *a lot* of Arendellians and only one of her, but still... she was queen. “Thanks. I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got it.”

“Don’t forget the earrings,” Gerda called as she followed Kai and Olina out.

Earrings? Anna glanced at the beautiful amber jewels set beside her crown on the vanity table. They were important somehow, but she couldn’t remember why.

Olaf squeezed in through the door as the others exited. He went straight to the chair where Gerda had draped the gown. “Ooh, is this the dress you’re wearing to your meeting with one of the princes from the Southern Isles? I like it. I like it. It says, ‘I’ve forgotten all about your lying youngest brother who pretended to love me and then tried to kill me.’”

“Wait, what?” Anna groaned and yanked on the hairbrush she was using to tame and braid her hair. There were few things she liked less than being reminded of the *very* brief period when she’d thought she should marry the evil Prince Hans of the Southern Isles. To be fair, Hans *had* been the first guy her own age she’d talked to in thirteen years, so maybe it made sense that he’d spun her head a bit. She was pretty sure that his twelve older brothers were not evil, but some of them delighted in reminding her of her almost-fatal infatuation. “That meeting is *today*?”

Ugh. That was why the earrings were important. They’d been a gift from the king of the Southern Isles to her mother.

“The meeting is before the seed dedication,” said Olaf. “Do you think they’ll have snacks?”

“That’s *also* today?” Anna groaned again. Farmer Niels had been so excited when he invited her, and she was excited about attending, but her schedule was more snarled than her hair. She definitely should’ve asked Kai to repeat the agenda. “Do you know when the delegation arrives?”

“It starts...” Olaf raised a stick arm and frowned. “I don’t wear a watch, but I’m pretty sure it’s now. The carriages were arriving while I was waiting in the hall.”

Anna jammed her crown on top of her hastily braided hair. As she quickly changed into her gown, she wondered, not for the first time, how Elsa had done it all. She knew her sister was amazing—literally magical—

but still. Sometimes Anna felt like she needed two of herself so she could be in more places at once.

Like right now. Should she call for Kai and confess she'd double-booked the meeting and the seed ceremony? Ask him to contact Farmer Niels and reschedule? And what about Berit?

At her own tenth birthday, she'd pretended the paintings on the wall were party guests just to feel a little less lonely.

Anna rubbed her damp eyes and blinked down at the invitation.

It wasn't right for a child in Arendelle to have to celebrate her birthday alone. Not if Anna could do something about it. And she could! The best part of being queen was the opportunities it gave her to make people's lives better.

"Olaf," she said, "I'm going to do it. I'm going to the meeting, the seed dedication, *and* a ten-year-old's birthday party."

"That's the spirit!" Olaf cheered. "But how?"

"We're going to need some help." She shoved the invitation into her pocket, scooped the amber earrings from her vanity, and slipped them on as she burst out of her bedroom, already calling her fiancé's name.

"Kristoff!"

Anna glanced up and down the hallway. The suit of armor next to her door seemed to be missing its head... and its feet. Kristoff popped out from behind it—wearing both the helmet and the metal shoes. At least, she assumed it was Kristoff. The person was the right height, had broad shoulders, and was wearing Kristoff's fur-lined leather tunic.

He took a clanking step forward. "I'm here. What do you need?"

Anna nestled against the front of his tunic. He always smelled like moss and reindeer; it was an unusual combination, but the scent calmed her nerves and made her smile. "Have I told you this morning that I love you and you're the best?"

Kristoff's brown eyes were shining behind the visor of the helmet, which he flipped up so he could plant a kiss on her cheek. "You haven't even told me 'good morning' yet."

Anna laughed. "Good morning." Then her frown returned. "Now, do you have any advice on how to do eight things at once?"

"Eight?" Olaf asked. "I can only think of..." He started to count on the twiggy fingers of one hand, then gave up when he ran out. "Less than eight."

“Okay, it’s just three. But what am I going to do? I have no birthday present. I’m late to meet the delegates from the Southern Isles. I know nothing about seeds. And—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Kristoff’s metal shoes clanged as he took a step forward to put his hands on her shoulders. “Take a deep breath. We’ve got this. What is it that you and Grand Pabbie always say? Do the...”

“*Do the next right thing.*” Anna exhaled slowly. She could do hard things if she took them one step at a time. She *had* done much harder things than handling a snarled schedule. “Yes. You’re right. I’ll just...” Anna took a brief moment to think. “Go get Sven. We have things to do.”

“Sure.” Metal crashed to the ground as Kristoff stripped off the armor. “But can you tell me *what* things?”

“Simple.” Anna was already turning toward the library, mentally rehearsing what she was going to say to the Southern Isles delegation. “You’re going to help me sneak out of a royal meeting and to a kid’s birthday party in the village without being seen.”

Olaf paused from attaching the armor’s left foot to its right leg. “And to the seed ceremony,” he said.

Anna nodded at Olaf. “Right. And that.”

“You got it.” Kristoff tugged off the helmet and tossed it to Olaf. “Phew. I thought it was going to be something tough, like running away from wolves or a snow monster, or tricking the Earth Giants into breaking a dam and almost flooding a village.”

Anna laughed and called over her shoulder, “There’s always tomorrow!”

Unless, of course, tomorrow’s schedule was also bursting at the seams. But, no, Anna wouldn’t think about that right now. She was doing the *next* right thing—which was to greet the delegation from the Southern Isles and hope they liked her earrings.

When Anna rushed into the library, she found Prince Lars of the Southern Isles and his wife, Princess Helga, seated at a long table between two giant stacks of books. Her shoes skidded on the polished wooden floor as she came to a stop above the inlaid design. Queens were probably not supposed to skid. Or be late. Or get in dubious engagements with men they’d just met. Stupid Hans! He wasn’t even here and he was *still* making things awkward.

“Good morning,” Anna said. “Oh, please. Stay seated. There’s no need to get up.”

The other royals stood and bowed anyway. Prince Lars was a tall, round man with a warm smile and large spectacles. Helga was shorter and rounder, with bigger glasses and a bigger smile.

Anna gave a quick curtsy. “I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“No problem at all.” Lars gestured to the bookshelves around them. “We’ve been perusing your wonderful library and collecting books. Have I told you how much we enjoy studying history?”

“Yes, you—” Anna hoped to change the subject, but it was too late. Lars plunged into describing a book he’d found on ice harvesting through the ages. She liked Lars—of the thirteen Southern Isles princes, he might have been her favorite—but he and his wife were the most likely to bore her to sleep with historical facts.

When he finally paused to breathe, Anna quickly jumped in. “Do you know who’d really like this conversation? My fiancé, Kristoff, since he’s an ice aficionado. Or Elsa, since... *ice*.”

“Will she be joining us?” asked Helga. “I’ve heard so much about her wonderful powers.”

“My country so enjoyed working with your sister, if only from afar,” added Lars.

“Oh. No. Sorry. It’s just me.” Anna glanced out the north window toward Ahtohallan and the Enchanted Forest. “Elsa really is the best.”

“Indeed,” said Helga, nodding enthusiastically. “We appreciate the invitation to your home and hope we enjoy working with you just as much.”

“Do you think you won’t?” Anna wished she could gulp the words back in. Was she messing this up already? Before lunch was even served? “I’m not normally late—or, well, sometimes I am, but I try not to be.”

“Oh!” Lars exchanged panicked looks with his wife. “We didn’t mean to sound critical of your punctuality, Your Majesty. Helga was just expressing our gratitude for your hospitality and your willingness to make sure that, er, bit of unpleasantness with Hans doesn’t impact the long friendship between Arendelle and the Southern Isles.”

“Unpleasantness? Oh, you mean that time your youngest brother tried to kill me and my sister?” Anna had *tried* to make it sound like a joke, but the prince and princess winced.

“That would be it,” he said.

Anna probably wasn't supposed to mention that. Hadn't she hoped that *they* wouldn't mention it? There was a long, uncomfortable silence while they stared at the floor, the doors, the bookshelves. Lars reached for a book from his stack.

Anna was blowing this! She almost wished Lars would resume telling her about the history of ice, just to break the quiet. Even the footmen at the doors seemed to be giving her *do something* looks.

Anna fiddled with a loose piece of hair until inspiration struck. "Oh! Did you notice these earrings? Your father gave them to my mother when she became queen."

"A lovely gift for a lovely queen." Helga exhaled her relief and dabbed at her forehead. "We have heard wonderful things about your mother. And the earrings suit you, Queen Anna."

"They were a symbol of the strong bond between our kingdoms." Anna tried to make her voice firm and regal. She lowered her tone even more when she added, "I wore them today as a reminder of that history."

"Do you need to be reminded?" Lars looked at his wife with concern.

"What? No. I just meant..." Anna glanced at the door. Where was Olaf when she needed him?

As if on cue, there was a knock. "Sorry. I need to check on that." She pushed back her chair so forcefully that Helga's book tower wobbled. Anna pointed to a plate on the table. "Help yourself to some cookies and enjoy the library. I'll be back soon."

Anna didn't stop running when she reached the hallway, where Olaf was pointing a twig arm to the left. "Sven and Kristoff are waiting this way." He did a little jig on the carpet as he trotted to keep up with her. "So, how's it going in there?"

She rubbed her temples. Sometimes the crown gave her a headache. "Well, I somehow managed to make them think I was wearing these earrings as a sort of diplomatic threat? Not quite sure how *that* happened. Why couldn't this have been a meeting with the Baron of Snoob? He and I get along great. You know what? Let's not talk about it. Let's just get to the party as quickly as possible, focus on making Berit feel fully welcomed to Arendelle, then get back before they notice I'm gone."

"Great idea, great idea," said Olaf. "But let's not talk about it *that* way." He pointed to a door behind them. "Because we just ran by Sven."



The address on the invitation belonged to a red house on a cozy street in the center of the village. Its steeply peaked roof lined up with a row of others, like a mini mountain range. Its windows sparkled like its neighbors'; its porch was clean swept. Despite this, there were a few clues that Berit's family was newly moved in. The window boxes on either side of the door were still empty, while the neighboring houses had filled theirs with fresh dirt, ready to plant bulbs that would become the spring and summer's lush crocuses. There weren't curtains hung on the windows yet, and there weren't any sounds of friendly chatter coming through the open front door.

"How nice it must be to have a house all snuggled up to your neighbors'," Anna mused. "Can you imagine all those playmates right next door and down the street?"

Olaf, sitting beside her on the wagon's bench, nodded. Sven, wearing his harness, snorted, still catching his breath from the run across town. Kristoff turned around in the driver's seat, shrugged, and said, "Don't look at me. I was raised in the woods."

Anna mussed his hair and hopped down from the wagon. "Can you stay nearby? I'm going to *want* to stay all day, but I *need* to get back to the castle and the meeting."

"Seeds," said Olaf. "Don't forget about the seed ceremony."

"Right!" Anna said, trying not to panic. "And that!"

Kristoff pointed to a water trough at the corner of the street. "We'll wait right there. Are you sure there isn't more I can do? I'm good at wrangling snowgies and assembling chocolate fountains."

Anna laughed from Berit's front porch. "Nope, being my getaway wagon is perfect. I can handle the rest."

Kristoff nodded and flicked Sven's reins. "All right, but I'm here if you need me. And Sven says, '*I'm here, too.*'"

As the wagon pulled away, Olaf took off one of his arms so he could wave it to get her attention. "And me!"

"Thanks," Anna called. Under her breath she added, "But I should do it myself."

She straightened her crown and knocked. At least this part of her day should be delightful. She loved meeting Arendellians, and who knew, maybe there would be chocolate!

“Hello?” she called. “Anyone home?”

The door swung open to reveal a room with blue wallpaper, patterned with white diamonds; a polished wooden floor; and a small girl with dark braids and huge eyes. She gasped.

“You must be the birthday girl,” said Anna with a grin. “Welcome to Arendelle, Berit. And happiest tenth birthday!”

“You came!” Berit curtsied, then hugged her, turning her head to call over her shoulder while her arms were still tight around Anna’s waist. “See, Mama? I told you she’d come. Mama said the queen is too busy, but everyone says you’re so nice and I just knew you’d come. Maybe I like Arendelle after all!”

“Queen Anna!” A tall woman with a round face and a white apron dropped into a trembling curtsy as she stared, unblinking, at Anna. “You actually came? Er... welcome! We are so honored to have you visit our house.” She curtsied again, then added, “Berit, stop smothering the queen and invite her inside.”

“I’m so happy to be here.” Anna let Berit take her hand and lead her. The room seemed to be half birthday party and half still-packed crates. “Wow, you really did *just* move here.”

“Four days ago.” Berit scrunched her nose. “I wanted to celebrate my birthday back in Weselton, but we were too busy packing.”

“I’m glad that you’re here.” Anna squeezed the girl’s hand. “And I’m sure you’re going to make new friends really soon.”

“I hope so,” said Berit.

Anna scanned the room again, noticing a tray of her favorite dessert on the table. “I see you’ve already discovered Blodget’s Bakery—so you’re off to a good start.”

“Queen Anna,” Berit’s mom said, “may we get you anything? A drink? Some food? A seat?” She hastily moved a box from a chair and brushed off the cushion.

“Oh.” Anna glanced out the window toward her waiting friends. She really couldn’t stay, but... “Maybe just one krumkake.”

“Those are my favorite!” Berit beamed, her twin braids flying as she rushed to get a rolled cookie for the queen.

But as the girl placed one on a plate, Anna’s eyes landed on what was *next* to the dessert. “Presents! Drat, I forgot yours.”

“That’s okay.” Berit handed her the krumkake with a shrug. “You don’t have to bring me a gift. I’m just so happy you’re here.”

“Truly, we’re honored, Your Majesty,” said her mom.

“Nope. The birthday girl gets a present,” said Anna, stuffing the cookie into her mouth. She had no idea what that present would be, but this was the perfect excuse to get out the door and on to her next stop. Still chewing, she backed out of the house. Then she swallowed and stuck her head through the doorway to add, “I’ll just scoot back to the castle and get it. Be back soon.”

Kristoff, Olaf, Sven, and the wagon were ready and waiting. They were deep in a debate about which treat from Blodget’s Bakery was the best. Kristoff, in his best Sven voice, was answering. “*Really, I insist, it must be the carrot cake.*”

“Cake!” Anna’s stomach rumbled; one krumkake was never enough. “Oh, I do hope I’m back in time for cake, but for now... let’s go plant some seeds.”

“Think there’s extra cake for us, too?” Kristoff asked. He flicked the reins and told Sven, “We’re off to the fields.”

“Olaf,” Anna said, “I need a present. What should I give a ten-year-old?”

“A puppy!” Olaf suggested immediately.

Anna shook her head. “No live gifts.”

Olaf paused to think. “A boat? A sauna? A bridge?”

Kristoff turned around in the driver’s seat. “Are you just naming things you see?”

They all laughed when Olaf said, “Well, yes.”

Kristoff leaned forward to pat the reindeer. “I always give Sven a bunch of carrots.” He switched to his Sven voice and spoke for the reindeer. “*The perfect gift. Thank you, Kristoff.*”

In his normal voice, he added, “The trolls gave me a new moss quilt for my birthday every year.”

Anna smiled at the mention of his unusual family. “While I’m sure that was lovely, that’s probably not the right gift for Berit.”

Olaf leaned his head on Anna’s shoulder. “I’ve never been to a tenth-birthday party.”

Anna sighed. “Unless you count those five minutes, me neither.” She tried to remember what she’d wanted when she was ten. Mostly it had just

been Elsa's company.

Sven's hooves clattered to a stop, and Olaf hopped up on the seat, his sadness forgotten as he spread his arms to point at the freshly plowed fields. "Have you ever been to a seed dedication? Because we're here!"

Anna straightened her crown again and smoothed her skirt as she stepped out of the wagon. *Think queenly, regal thoughts*, she told herself. But her queenly, regal thoughts were interrupted by Sven clearing his throat.

He lifted a hoof and gestured to his snout. At first she thought he was demanding a snack—which was fair; he'd been busy that morning—but then he pointed his hoof at her. Anna wiped her mouth, her hand coming away with an impressive number of krumkake crumbs.

"Thanks, Sven," she whispered, cleaning her hand on her skirt before extending it to shake Farmer Niels's.

"Welcome, Queen Anna." Niels used his broad-brimmed hat to gesture to all the other farmers standing alongside the field. "We are honored you've come to plant the ceremonial first seed as a sign of the coming spring and our hope for a good growing season."

"I'm glad to be here." Anna bounced on the toes of her purple silk shoes, which caused them to sink into the soft soil.

"Do you know my favorite part of spring?" Olaf popped up between Anna and Niels to ask. "It's almost summer." The snowman sighed and got a dreamy look on his face. "Ah, summer..."

The farmers, Anna, and Kristoff waited for his reverie to end, but after five seconds Sven snorted impatiently and Anna blurted, "So, basically what I need to do is plant a seed? I've never done that before. Sounds fun."

"The ceremonial first seed of the season," Niels said, correcting her. He gestured to another farmer, who stepped forward holding a large bag of seeds. Niels reached inside, plucked one out, and placed it carefully in Anna's cupped hands.

"It's so tiny!" she said, marveling and balancing it on the tip of her finger so she could see the speck better. "I've got freckles bigger than this."

"That's smaller than Sven's fleas," said Kristoff as he peered over her shoulder. When the reindeer stomped a foot indignantly, Kristoff scratched his own head and said, "You know, if he *had* fleas—which he doesn't. I don't, either." He froze mid-scratch and lowered his hand, bumping Anna's outstretched one.

She looked up from her finger—her now bare finger—and smiled sheepishly at the farmers. “Uh... How important is the ‘ceremonial’ part versus the ‘first’ part?” She held out her empty hand. “Because I might have accidentally lost it.”

There was a collective gasp from the farmers as Anna dropped to her knees. “But don’t worry! I’ll find it!”

She scanned the bumpy ground in front of her. “It really *is* very tiny, though. Does it have to be so impossibly small?” Anna leaned forward and pinched something off the ground. “Is that it? No, that’s dirt. That’s dirt, too. That’s—that’s krumkake crumbs. It’s going to be nearly impossible to find it among all this dirt—but... ceremonial first seed. Don’t worry. I’ll keep looking.”

“Your Majesty, you’re muddying your gown!” said Niels. “Please stand up. We’ll give you another seed!”

Anna’s cheeks burned as she stood and wiped her dirty hands on her skirt. She hoped she hadn’t let the farmers down, and she really wished her sister were there. Elsa wouldn’t have dropped the seed. She probably would’ve floated it into the ground on a beautiful, magical snowflake.

“If you plant *two* seeds, that’s got to be double the luck,” called out a grinning farmer in green overalls. “So double thanks from us all, Queen Anna.”

Kristoff caught her eye and gave her an encouraging thumbs-up. Anna smiled weakly and held out her hand for a second ceremonial “first” seed. This time she bent and carefully placed it directly in the pre-dug hole Niels indicated.

He looked at her with an expectant smile. All the farmers were, actually. Maybe she was supposed to say something?

“Um.” She thought quickly. “May this seed be a symbol of all the crops. May Arendelle’s skies be filled with the perfect amount of sunshine and rain and...”

“And who knows—maybe in a few months we’ll be singing about *this* Peter Pumpkin becoming fertilizer,” added Olaf as he tapped a snowball foot over the hole.

Niels cleared his throat. “That was a carrot seed.”

Sven grunted and swiveled his head toward the mention of his favorite food.

“Oh.” Olaf nodded. “So in a few months we’ll be chasing Sven away from these fields.”

“Speaking of *away from the fields...*”—Anna glanced down the hill toward Arendelle’s clock tower—“as much as I’d love to stay, I’ve got to get back to the castle.”



As she dashed through the castle’s corridors, Anna’s braid began to unravel. She tucked it under her crown and hoped it would stay put. Maybe she’d start a new hair trend. Disheveled chic? That could be a thing.

Anna took a deep breath and entered the library. “Prince Lars, Princess Helga, I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Oh.” They looked up from their books, seeming startled to find her standing there. “No problem, Queen Anna,” said Lars. “This really is a wonderful library you have.”

“I’m so glad to hear it.” She slumped onto a chair and caught her breath. “There was a minor issue I had to take care of, but I’m here now.”

Helga lowered her book. “What sort of issue? Your gown is muddy.”

“And you’ve lost an earring.” Lars inserted a bookmark and closed his cover. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m missing an earring?” Anna’s hands flew to her ears, confirming that, yes, her left lobe was bare. “The symbol of the good relationship between our countries? Oh, no!”

The prince and princess exchanged alarmed looks when Anna jumped out of her seat.

“I’m sure it will—” Helga began.

“I’ll find it!” Anna called over her shoulder. “Don’t worry. Be right back.”

She burst into the hallway and bent over—both to catch her breath and to scan the carpet. No earring anywhere she could see, but there was a friendly snowman.

“Are we still looking for the carrot seed?” Olaf asked. “Because I’m pretty sure that’s a goner.”

Between pants, Anna filled him in.

“Did you know that amber sinks in fresh water but floats in salt water?” Olaf began his own scan of the carpet. “That doesn’t really work here. We’d

have to flood the whole castle to get it to float. So we should probably just keep looking.”

“It’s got to be at the party.” Anna straightened up and straightened her crown. “At least it gives me an excuse to head back there. Let’s go!”



All these quick trips over the cobblestones were starting to make Anna feel wagon-sick. Or maybe she was hungry. What she wouldn’t give for some chocolate right about then.

Thinking of chocolate, Anna groaned. “I still don’t have a present for Berit. Where’s Oaken’s Cloaken’s when you need it?”

Olaf tapped his chin. “It’s a few streets over. Oooh, are we getting her a sauna after all? Or some sunscreen? It’s Oaken’s own invention. Smells like lutefisk.”

The whole wagon was laughing when they reached Berit’s house, but Anna was surprised to hear laughing coming from *inside*, too. Good! Maybe they didn’t need her anymore. She could just pop in, grab her earring, apologize for forgetting her present—again—and then get back to the castle before Lars and Helga finished their books.

“Queen Anna!” Berit called from the doorway. “You’re back!”

“I am,” said Anna. “It looks like you made some friends.”

“It’s because they heard *you* were here!” Berit was the first to hug Anna, but a half dozen children piled on. “Can you stay?”

“Oof.” Anna looked over the heads of the group surrounding her. She didn’t spot the earring anywhere. “For a little while. How about a party game? Hide-and-seek?”

Berit’s mom helped peel the cheering children off Anna as the birthday girl announced, “I’ll count first. Everyone’s playing. You too, Mama.”

Anna used the counting time to search for her earring. It wasn’t beneath the tablecloth—but there were two boys giggling under there. It wasn’t behind a stack of unpacked crates with Berit’s mom. It wasn’t on or under the flowered cushion of the chair.

“Ten. Nine. Eight...” Berit was facing the stone fireplace with her hands firmly over her eyes. The earring didn’t appear to be on the mantel, either.

“Drat!” whispered Anna. Maybe it truly *was* in the castle hallway. Or in the field! As Berit counted, “Five-four-three...,” Anna snuck out of the

house and climbed into the wagon.

“Where to?” asked Kristoff.

“The castle.” Anna rubbed her forehead. She was getting sweaty from all the running around, which was not helping her crown stay put. “Olina is going to kill me. Lunch has got to be so cold.”

“Eh.” Kristoff shrugged as the wagon bumped toward the docks and the castle beyond. “Arendelle’s main export is ice. Tell the prince it’s supposed to be cold, that he’s just getting a taste of our goods.”

“Kristoff, that’s brilliant!” Or maybe it was bonkers; Anna wasn’t sure which.

He looked delighted as he paused the wagon by the harbor to let a baker with an overloaded cart pass. The scent of freshly baked bread made Anna’s stomach rumble.

“There you are, Your Majesty,” someone called. “We thought you’d forgotten us.”

Anna turned to see the harbormaster waiting with a group of boat captains.

“No, of course not,” she told him. “Er, forgotten *what* exactly?”

“Why, the boat christening ceremony, of course. For Captain Thea’s new ship.”

“Right! The boat christening.” Anna climbed off the wagon. Huh. She must’ve slept right through Kai’s mentioning that, but now that she thought about it, she did recall Captain Thea asking her a few weeks earlier, and *of course* she’d said yes. Anna would really have to start remembering to check her schedule. Also, what *was* a boat christening? Was it quick?

Luckily, it *was*. The harbormaster recited a short poem about calm seas and gentle waves and then asked Anna to crack a bottle across the ship’s bow. “Really give it a good whack,” he said encouragingly. “It’s bad luck if it doesn’t break.”

“Wouldn’t want that.” Anna inhaled and concentrated on putting all her muscle into swinging the bottle at the ship. It smashed beautifully, and the captains cheered and clapped. They spun Anna down the dock in a parade of hugs, backslaps, and praise. It was important to her that she acknowledge everyone waiting to greet her, but when she reached the end of the line—and the end of the dock—she leaned back against a ship to steal a moment of privacy. She just needed to catch her breath before she raced back to the wagon, the castle, the meeting, the party....

“Heads up!” called someone from above her, and Anna *did* raise her head—just in time to see a deckhand with a mop toss a bucket of dirty water over the side of boat... and all over her.

Anna couldn’t shriek; she didn’t want to scare the poor deckhand. It wasn’t *his* fault she’d been hiding in the path of his mop water. But what was she going to *do*? What could possibly be the next right thing?

Anna dripped her way back down the dock, drawing shocked and confused glances from all the people who’d seen her—dry—just moments before.

“Kristoff,” she called, trying to hang on to her smile.

“I got you,” he said, clasping her wet hand in his dry, steady one and helping her off the dock. “What—what happened?”

“Mop water and—never mind that.” Anna looked down at the puddle forming around her feet. “I can’t go back to the meeting like this!”

“Um, you could tell them that since Arendelle’s biggest export is ice, you’re demonstrating ice in its liquid form.” Kristoff shook his head.

“Nope. Don’t call me brilliant this time. I got nothing.”

“Your Majesty,” two people called from her right. One was the harbormaster, carrying a stack of towels. They smelled suspiciously fishy. The second was Dagmar, the dressmaker.

“Queen Anna,” Dagmar said from the door to her shop. “I have your new dress practically finished. Step in here and we’ll get you changed in a jiffy.”

“Really?” Anna beamed.

Kristoff groaned as he flopped onto a bench in front of the store. “The dressmaker always takes forever.”

“No, no,” said Anna, both in response to the harbormaster’s offer of fish-scented towels and to her disgruntled fiancé. “This will be quick. The dress is practically done, right, Dagmar?”

“Of course, Your Majesty. Just a few final stitches.”

“I’ll be right back.” Anna seemed to be saying that an awful lot.

Except... *how* could a few final stitches take so long? Normally she appreciated Dagmar’s attention to detail. But not at the moment.

After hearing a particularly loud sigh from Sven through the shop’s open window, Anna stepped off the dressmaker’s stool. “Thank you so much, Dagmar. The dress is beautiful—but I really *must* be going. There’s a

luncheon and they're waiting and—" Anna tripped on the hem but turned it into a curtsy. "Thank you!"

"*Bo-bing?*" Dagmar spat out the pins she had balanced between her lips. "Going, Your Majesty? But there are still pins along the seams."

Anna waved her hand. "It'll be fine. I'm sure it'll be fine. Thank you again."

She dashed out the door with a final wave. Kristoff quickly had Sven buckled into his harness, and Olaf bounced into the wagon.

"Ouch!" Anna exclaimed as she settled onto the bench beside him. She'd just found the first pin.

By the time they made it through the castle gates, she'd found three more.

"You're like a royal pincushion," Olaf said. "Or a yo-yo—back and forth. Back and forth."

"So true, Olaf." She gave each of them a hasty hug before scrambling down and through the castle door. "So true."



Anna shoved her crown onto her sopping hair before plunging into the library. "Hello again! Now, where were we?"

Lars didn't look up from his book. "You were looking for your missing earring."

Helga marked her page with a finger and gave a startled blink. "Did you change dresses, Your Majesty? That's a lovely shade of green."

"Right! My earring." Anna raised a hand to her still-empty earlobe, then pivoted. "I'll go find that."

She was halfway in the hall when a pin's jab reminded her of Helga's compliment. "Oh, and thank you. Be right back."

"Mm-hmm." Helga was already engrossed in her book. "Take your time."

At least they didn't miss her. There'd been a tray of sandwiches and soup on the table, so clearly Olina had known not to delay the meal for her. Her stomach rumbled as she raced down the hallway. She should've grabbed a sandwich to go.

The earring *had* to be at the party, right? She must've overlooked it last time. Or maybe it was in the field? She hoped she hadn't planted it with the

ceremonial second seed.

Anna was out of breath by the time she reached the wagon. Sven and Olaf looked like they'd been napping, and Kristoff was casually strumming his lute. They all jumped when she clambered in and gasped, "Back to the party."

"Already?" Kristoff looked at her flushed face and changed his question to a statement. "All righty—let's go."



The earring was not at the party, but plenty more children were.

Berit gave her a delighted smile. "You're very good at hide-and-seek! No one could find you anywhere. Did you see all my new friends?"

Anna nodded. She was exhausted. Also hungry. And all the krumkaker were gone.

"My new friends were asking if you'd come to their birthday parties, too," Berit told her. "I said of course you would. You will, right?"

There were at least twenty sets of eyes watching her. How could she disappoint them? But twenty parties? Twenty more days like this? Anna's stomach rumbled. She looked at the empty dessert tray. Her wet hair dripped down her back, and a pin poked her shin as she took a shaky breath and a step back toward the door. "Um, wow. What an honor to have so many invitations.... I really must be going now. Thank you for inviting me to your wonderful party."

Outside, Kristoff had the wagon ready. "Where to now?" he asked. "The harbor? The castle? The fields? Somewhere new?"

Anna's hands trembled as she removed her crown. It kept slipping in her wet hair. "Um."

"Anywhere on Arenfjord. You just tell me where to go," he said encouragingly, gripping the reins.

"I'm not sure. I need to"—she closed her eyes—"think. Next right thing... but which is *next*?"

"What is she doing?" asked Olaf.

"Shhh," said Anna. "Give me a second."

Olaf gave her half of one before whispering to Kristoff, "Do you think we need to call a doctor? Is she frozen again? Do we need to tell Grand Pabbie? Maybe someone should go get Elsa."

“I’m already ahead of you, little buddy,” Kristoff whispered back.

Anna opened her eyes. “I think I need my sis—”

“Anna!” The cry, accompanied by a whinny, came from behind them.

She spun to see Elsa and a frozen Water Nokk galloping into the square and pivoting into a graceful stop. As Elsa dismounted, Anna ran to embrace her. “How did you know I needed you?”

“A little birdie told me—a paper birdie, written by Kristoff and delivered by Gale. I called the Water Nokk.” She gestured to the water horse, which nodded and stomped its watery hoof, leaving a small puddle on the cobblestones. “Tough day?”

“You didn’t have to drop everything and come,” Anna said, but she was glad Elsa had.

“That’s what sisters are for. You taught me that.” Elsa took the crown and placed it back on Anna’s head, then braided her hair.

“How did you do it, Elsa?” Anna asked, her blue-green eyes watery. “I want to be a good queen, but everyone needs something. How do I do the *next* right thing when they’re all right things and they’re happening at the same time? How did you make being queen look so easy?”

Elsa laughed. “Easy? Being queen is a huge job; it was never easy. If I made it look easy, it’s only because I had you and Olaf and Kristoff and Sven here to help me.”

Anna’s shoulders drooped. “Sometimes I feel like I’m letting people down if I say no.”

Elsa shook her head, then put an arm around Anna’s shoulder. “You’re a great queen. We all think you’re a great queen. You need to stop listening to the voice in your head telling you otherwise.”

“Wait!” Olaf popped up beside them, forgetting that he was pretending not to eavesdrop. “Anna’s hearing voices, too? Ah-*ah-ah-ah!*” He sang an off-key version of the tune that had led Elsa to Ahtohallan.

“Olaf!” Elsa laughed. “Not that kind of voice. This is the kind that comes from doubt, but the only person who needs to believe in Anna is *herself*.” She turned back to her sister. “You have such a big heart; you want to help everyone—but people want to help you, too. Let us. It’s what sisters do.”

“And fiancés,” added Kristoff.

“And friends,” said Olaf. “Right, Sven?”

Sven looked up from the carrot he was chomping and nodded. “*Agreed*,” added Kristoff in his Sven voice.

Olaf wandered off while Anna stood quietly, absorbing their words. Finally, she lifted her head. “I guess I could’ve sent Sven and Kristoff to the seed ceremony. Sven’s going to eventually eat half that carrot crop, so why shouldn’t he be there when it’s planted?”

“Exactly,” said Elsa.

“And maybe the Water Nokk could’ve gone to the boat christening?” Anna said. “The harbormaster loves the Water Spirit.”

Elsa nodded encouragingly. “The Water Nokk loves to race the boats.”

“And the party...” They turned to where Olaf had been standing, then toward the shrieks of laughter coming from Berit’s open door. Through it they could see Olaf entertaining practically every child in the village with his shape-shifting charades. “Clearly all they needed was an enchanted snowman.”

As if on cue, Berit called out, “Best birthday ever. I love my present, Queen Anna!”

“He’s only to borrow,” Anna called back.

Berit gave her a thumbs-up and turned back to her guests. Anna groaned and faced her sister. “I still need to attend the meeting with Prince Lars myself, huh?”

Elsa laughed and pointed to her sister’s head. “It comes with the crown.” Then she reached for Anna’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “If it helps, I’ll go, too.”

“Thanks. Because somehow, we’re going to have to be more entertaining than whatever books they’re reading.” Anna laughed and tugged her sister toward the wagon.

“Check this out,” Kristoff called from where he was standing by his reindeer. “Sven’s got some fancy new harness decorations.”

“My earring!” Anna ran across the cobblestones and threw her arms around the reindeer. He gave her a confused lick. “Sven, you saved it.”

“Hey! I’m the one who found it,” Kristoff insisted, plucking the glittering jewel from Sven’s strap and handing it to her.

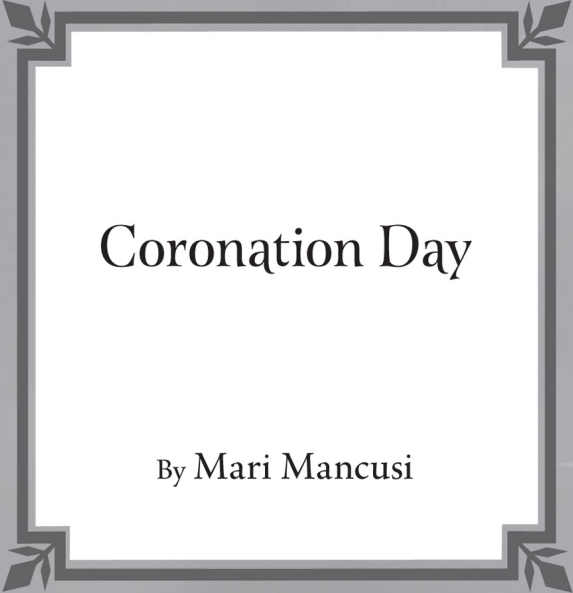
Anna gave him a kiss. “Thank you! You’ve saved the day more than once. All of you have.”

As Kristoff helped her and Elsa into the wagon and they headed back to the castle, Anna knew she still didn’t look like some storybook’s picture of

a perfect, regal queen. Her hair was wet; there was dirt beneath her nails; there were pins in her dress, and probably some sugary children's handprints on it, too—but each of these was a sign of her connection to Arendelle. She didn't have to be a queen like anyone else. She only had to be true to herself... and maybe double-check her schedule... and let those who loved her help.

She beamed at her favorite people. "I don't know what I'd do without you all."

Elsa helped Anna fasten the earring, then linked her arm through her sister's. "Well, good thing you'll never have to find out."



Coronation Day

By Mari Mancusi



“It’s coronation day!”

Elsa groaned at the sound of the way-too-cheery voice chirping in her ears. She rolled over in bed, pulling the covers over her head, but it did no good. A moment later, she was pounced on by something very excited.

And very sister-shaped.

“I can’t believe you’re still sleeping on a day like today,” Anna cried, unceremoniously yanking the covers off her sister’s head and giving her a reproachful look. She was dressed in an olive-green nightgown, and her hair was plaited in two messy braids. “And here they say I’m the lazy one!”

Elsa rubbed her eyes blearily. “Sorry,” she said. “I was having the strangest dream.”

“Dream? What was it about?”

Elsa frowned, trying to remember. It was all rather foggy yet very vivid at the same time. Like an old memory, frayed at the edges. “Well, for one thing, *you* were queen of Arendelle,” she said slowly. “And I was... well, I was hanging out in this... icy cave of memories?”

“Cave of memories,” Anna repeated, her eyes sparkling. “That’s kind of neat. If I had one of those, I’d never have to remember where I put my hat again.” She paused. “Which reminds me. Have you seen my hat?”

Elsa rolled her eyes. Anna giggled and poked her in the ribs. Elsa returned the gesture by conjuring up a delicate ice flurry and aiming it directly at her sister’s freckled nose. Anna squealed and leapt backward.

“So unfair!” she cried. “Ice powers are totally cheating!”

“You started it,” Elsa reminded her with a smile, starting to feel better. The dream was slipping away, and reality was setting in. There was no cave. And *she* was the one becoming queen today, not Anna.

Her sister grinned. “Hey, that’s what little sisters are for! To be totally annoying!”

“Even when they’re eighteen years old?” Elsa asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Even when they’re *eighty*. Trust me, you’re not getting rid of me that easily,” Anna declared, making a grand gesture with her hand and managing to lose her balance in the process. Elsa had to grab her to stop her from falling off the bed.

“Good,” she said. “’Cause you’re stuck with me, too.”

“Girls, are you dressed yet?”

The two princesses looked up to see Iduna, their mother, standing at the door. The queen was outfitted in a luminous purple gown, making her look more like a young maiden than the mother of two grown girls. When her eyes fell on her daughters, still in their wrinkled nightclothes, she clucked her tongue disapprovingly.

“It’s nearly eleven o’clock,” she scolded. But Elsa could hear the amusement at the edge of her voice. She wasn’t really cross.

Iduna beckoned to Anna. “Go back to your own room,” she told her. “I’ll send Gerda up to help you dress.”

“I thought Gerda was going to help Elsa.”

Iduna smiled. “*I’m* going to help Elsa. It is her special day, after all.”

Anna grinned at her sister, then skipped out of the room.

Elsa turned to her mother, who was reaching into the wardrobe and plucking out an elegant green-and-black dress with rosemailing on the bodice and skirt. Elsa’s coronation dress, which her mother had hand-embroidered for the occasion.

Her mother...

Elsa felt an unexpected pang in her chest as she watched Iduna brush lint off the dress. Suddenly, she found herself crossing the room and throwing her arms around her mother as if she hadn’t seen her in years.

“What’s this all about?” Iduna asked, laughing. “You’re going to wrinkle your dress!” She kissed the top of her daughter’s head, then shoed her back to the bed. Elsa obeyed, feeling a little sheepish. Why had she just done that?

“Is everything okay, Elsa?” Iduna asked, carrying the dress over. She peered at her daughter worriedly. “You’re not nervous about today, are you?”

Elsa shook her head. “I’m fine,” she assured her mother. “I just... had a disturbing dream.”

“Oh?”

Suddenly Elsa wasn't sure she wanted to talk about it. But then her mother always told her it was best to talk about things that frightened you. To not keep them locked inside.

"Well, Anna was ruling Arendelle," she explained slowly. "And..." Her brow furrowed. "You and Father... died... in a shipwreck."

She felt a shiver crawl down her spine as the words slipped from her lips. As if saying them aloud somehow gave them a terrible power to come true.

But that was ridiculous, right?

"Oh, sweetheart," Iduna exclaimed. "That must have been awful." She met Elsa's eyes with her own, sympathy welling in her pupils. "But as you can see, it was just a dream. Your father and I are very much alive. In fact, I believe he's down in the kitchen, taste-testing all the coronation chocolate and driving poor Olina crazy." She snorted. "Taking his retirement a little too seriously, if you ask me."

"I still can't believe he's giving up the throne for me," Elsa mused as she stepped carefully into the gown Iduna held out for her, holding her mother's hand for balance. "I mean, most kings rule until they die. They don't just randomly abdicate their thrones so their twenty-one-year-old daughters can take charge of their kingdoms."

"Well, you might have noticed your father is not like most kings," Iduna pointed out. She began to fasten Elsa's dress. "Anyway, I think it's smart. Your grandfather died suddenly, which meant your father was forced to become king with very little guidance. He doesn't want the same for you. He wants to be around to help you learn your new role and guide you into being the best queen you can possibly be."

"I just hope I don't disappoint him," Elsa murmured.

"Disappoint him?" Iduna repeated incredulously. "Impossible." She peered at Elsa with worried eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked. "You don't seem yourself this morning."

Elsa didn't feel like herself, either. But she forced a laugh. "I guess I *am* just a little nervous about taking the scepter in hand today. Hopefully it won't freeze when I touch it." She made a face. "That would be awkward."

"It would be *amazing*," Iduna assured her, her frown disappearing and her eyes dancing with laughter. "In fact, if it didn't, I think people would be disappointed. You know how they love your ice powers."

“Right,” Elsa said. Even though it didn’t sound exactly right for some reason. Wow, the dream had really thrown her off balance.

“Don’t worry, Elsa,” Iduna said, pulling her daughter into a warm hug. “Everything is going to be perfect today. Because *you* are perfect. My sweet little Snow Queen.”

Elsa buried her face in her mother’s shoulder, sinking into the warmth of her embrace. Her mother always smelled so warm and earthy, as if she’d just stepped out of an enchanted forest. Whenever Elsa felt scared or insecure, she just had to breathe in that warm, familiar scent and everything would be okay.

But today, to Elsa’s surprise, her mother smelled different.

Salty, almost... and a bit damp.

As if she had just bathed in the sea...



“We’re about to rehearse! Where’s your sister?”

Queen Anna of Arendelle looked up at her fiancé, Kristoff, who was standing beside his reindeer, Sven, wringing his large hands together in frustration. She wrinkled her brow.

“Wait, she’s not here yet?” she asked. “I thought I saw Gale and Bruni an hour ago.”

“Gale and Bruni are here,” Kristoff agreed, gesturing to the Wind Spirit, who was swirling around Anna’s parents’ statue in the town square, and the Fire Spirit, who stood nearby watching. “Elsa, however, is not.”

Anna rose to her feet. “She said she’d be here,” she muttered, feeling a little cross. “I told her three times I needed her first thing in the morning for rehearsal.”

“Maybe she’s too busy with her important life in the Enchanted Forest and has forgotten all about us!” Olaf suggested brightly as he waddled over to the group. Anna shot him a sharp look, and the snowman took an apologetic step backward. “At least that’s what I heard some of the townspeople say,” he amended quickly. “Obviously, I don’t think that!”

Anna frowned. “Elsa would never do that. Especially not today of all days! We planned this together! She was looking forward to it.”

She glanced unhappily at the statue she’d commissioned of Iduna and Agnarr, holding hands as children. It had been seven years since their

parents had been lost at sea, and Anna had decided, as queen, she would declare their wedding anniversary an official Arendellian holiday. All the shops and schools would close and people would gather to share stories about their beloved king and queen. Elsa had been thrilled at the idea of honoring their parents.

So why wasn't she here?

Anna approached Gale, waving to get the Wind Spirit's attention. "Have you seen Elsa anywhere?" she asked hopefully. But the spirit only shook its pile of leaves from side to side, its way of saying no. Then it anxiously swirled around Anna, almost picking her up off her feet.

"I know. I'm getting worried, too," she said, grabbing on to a nearby lamppost for balance. Kristoff came up behind her, steadying her with his strong hands.

"I'm sure she's fine," he insisted. "I mean, hello. Magical Snow Queen? Pretty good at taking care of herself."

"I know." Anna turned to face him, looking up into his deep brown eyes. Kristoff was always great at helping her relax when she was stressed out. But this time, for some reason, she couldn't let it go. Call it sixth sense—a sister thing. "I just think it's strange she's not here."

Kristoff reached up, brushing a lock of hair from her eyes. "Do you want me to go look for her?" he asked. "Sven and I could travel to the Enchanted Forest. Maybe she just lost track of time. You know how she can be when she's deeply concentrating on her magic."

Anna nodded. "Good idea. I'll come, too."

"Aren't you needed here? To work on the memorial?"

"There's not going to be a memorial if we can't find my sister," Anna pointed out. "Saddle up the wagon. We'll head out as soon as you're ready." She turned to Olaf, who had removed one of his stick arms to scratch a tough-to-reach spot on his back. "You need to hold down the fort," she told the snowman. "Don't let the people of Arendelle think anything's wrong."

"Is something wrong?" Olaf's eyes grew wide. "Is Elsa in trouble? Because if Elsa's in trouble, I need to be there to help." He stuffed his arm back in its proper place. "I'm very helpful, you know. Remember the time I pretended to be king to save the town from a killer zombie?"

Anna sighed. That wasn't exactly how it had happened. But she didn't have time to argue. "Fine. You can come. Mattias can keep everyone in check."

The Arendelle general stepped up, as if on cue. “In check?” he asked, his brow furrowing. “Is something wrong?”

“Elsa’s in trouble!” Olaf exclaimed. “We’re going to the Enchanted Forest to save her from certain death!”

Kristoff groaned. “Olaf! We don’t even know if anything’s actually—”

Mattias straightened his military jacket. “If our Snow Queen is in trouble, it is my duty to help her. I’m coming with you.”

Anna sighed. Before she knew it, the whole town would be asking to come along. Which was rather sweet—to know how much they cared about Elsa. But also impractical.

“Okay, fine,” she told Mattias. “But no one else. Or Sven won’t even be able to pull the wagon.”

Bruni leapt onto Sven’s back, cocking its little salamander head questioningly. Anna smiled. “I suppose you’re little enough,” she amended. “But seriously, let’s head out now, before the Waffle Brothers and Mrs. Blodget also decide they’re needed on this quest and there’s no one left in Arendelle at all.”



“There she is, queen of Arendelle!”

Elsa grinned sheepishly when her father started cheering as she walked into the Great Hall, which was all decorated for her coronation after-party. There were long tables piled high with delicious-looking meats and fish and cheeses and oh-so-many desserts. And the centerpiece? A towering, ringed kransekake, drizzled in chocolate.

“Not yet,” she reminded her father. “I still must be officially coronated. You’re stuck with the job until then, and don’t you forget it.”

Agnarr laughed, coming around the table, dipping his finger into a vat of chocolate on the way and sticking it in his mouth. Elsa smirked. “Mother would kill you if she saw you doing that,” she noted.

Agnarr’s eyes twinkled. “She would expect nothing less.” He reached Elsa and threw his arms around her. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you,” he whispered in her ear. Then he pulled away, gazing at Elsa with loving green eyes. “This is a big deal, especially at your young age. But you’re handling it magnificently. Not at all like yours truly, when I came to the throne.”

“Well, to be fair, you had some not-so-great circumstances,” Elsa reminded him.

“That’s true,” Agnarr agreed. His eyes grew faraway. “I honestly don’t think I would have survived those years had it not been for your mother. She was my everything back then. Still is, actually, now that I think about it.”

Elsa groaned. “Oh no. Do not start getting mushy about Mother again.”

“Hey! I will be as mushy about your mother as I want to be,” her father declared. “Gotta make up for lost time after we spent so many years concealing our love from the kingdom.”

“Conceal, don’t feel,” Elsa murmured.

Her father gave her a sharp look. “Wait. Where did you hear that?”

Elsa shrugged uneasily, suddenly not sure. “I—I think... you must have said it to me before?” she stammered.

“No.” Agnarr shook his head, vehemently. “I would *never* say that to you, Elsa. It’s a poisonous expression my father used to say to shame me for having feelings. In fact, it almost destroyed your mother’s and my relationship. We both suffered for years, keeping secrets from each other. And we vowed not to repeat those mistakes with you girls. We’ve always tried to encourage you to express your emotions. I honestly think that’s what’s helped you keep your ice powers under control. I can’t imagine what would happen if you tried to conceal them.”

“Me neither.” Elsa shuddered.

“Of course, that’s not to say we’re perfect,” Agnarr added with a shrug. “I’ve made plenty of mistakes over the years. And you will, too, as queen. But just remember, Elsa. You never have to be anything but yourself. The rest—you can simply let it go.”

Elsa found herself nodding. “Let it go,” she repeated, feeling out the words with her lips. It was definitely better than *conceal, don’t feel*. “I like the sound of that.”

“The sound of what?”

Elsa turned to see her sister prance into the room, decked out in a beautiful green-and-yellow ball gown that expertly brought out her green eyes. She watched as Anna made a beeline for the chocolate, just as her father had done, dipping her finger into it with much enthusiasm.

Elsa groaned. “The two of you, I swear!”

“Aw. Come on! You know you want some,” Anna teased, dancing up to her sister and waving her chocolate-covered finger. “Mmmm. Chocolate...”

Elsa rolled her eyes, playfully swatting her sister’s hand away. Then she noticed something odd and frowned.

“What did you do to your hair?” she asked, reaching out and plucking a strange-looking lock from Anna’s otherwise auburn tresses.

Anna’s face went pale. “What are you talking about?” she asked. “What’s wrong with my hair?”

“It’s just... white,” Elsa stammered. “Like... pure white.”

“White?” Anna repeated. She grabbed the lock of hair from Elsa and stretched it out in front of her face. “Where? What do you mean?”

“It’s right...” Elsa started, then trailed off. Wait. Where was it? She was sure that it had been there a moment before. But now... it was gone.

“Um, never mind,” she mumbled. “Must have been a trick of the light.”

“Are you okay, Elsa?” Anna peered at her worriedly.

“I’m fine,” she assured her. She was starting to get annoyed at everyone asking her this. She forced a grin to her face. “I mean, nothing a little chocolate won’t help....”



“Can’t you move any faster, Sven?”

Anna tapped her foot impatiently against the wagon. She was now regretting taking the whole crew to the Enchanted Forest instead of just riding off on her horse, Havski. Of course, that would have been dangerous—to go off alone. But then, Anna had never really taken danger into consideration when she was worried about her sister.

And she was worried now.

The spirits seemed equally agitated. She’d sent Gale on ahead to search for Elsa, but the Wind Spirit had come back with no message from her sister and kept swirling around the wagon as if also frustrated by its lack of speed. This set off Bruni, who proceeded to accidentally set the wagon on fire.

“Hey!” Kristoff protested when he saw the smoke. “That’s fresh lacquer!”

“Don’t worry—I got it!” Olaf exclaimed, plopping himself down on top of the fire and succeeding in dousing the flames. “Ahh,” he said with a smile as his snow sizzled. “That feels just like summer.”

“Olaf, we need to hire you as Arendelle fire chief one of these days,” Mattias joked.

The snowman beamed at the idea. “My butt is always at your service,” he declared.

Anna groaned. “Come on, Sven, pick up the pace,” she urged again. “Pretend there’s a carrot factory at the end of the road.”

Kristoff turned to Anna, giving her a concerned look. “You really think something’s not right? Maybe Elsa just forgot.”

“No.” Anna shook her head. “Elsa wouldn’t forget something this important. And she wouldn’t just blow me off.”

But even as she said the words, something uncomfortable seemed to worm inside of her. Her sister *was* the fifth spirit now, her powers growing every day. What if at some point she *did* start to forget about her old life in Arendelle? After all, she had Ahtohallan. The Enchanted Forest. The spirits themselves. What did she need with ordinary people like them?

Anna felt a tightening in her throat. *No, I know my sister*, she scolded herself. *She would never forget us.*

But the alternative, she realized with rising dread, was even worse. For if Elsa hadn’t forgotten, it meant something was wrong.

Anna grabbed the reins from Kristoff, urging Sven on. “We have to hurry!”



“Your gloves, Your Majesty.”

Elsa startled at the sound of the voice, her eyes dropping down to her hands. She was in the chapel. In the midst of her own coronation ceremony, with all of Arendelle and the neighboring kingdoms in attendance. Her brow wrinkled in confusion. Hadn’t she just been in the dining room, joking with her family? How was she suddenly here?

And why was she wearing gloves?

Elsa never wore gloves. Mostly because the cold never bothered her. Also, they hindered her ice magic. But for some reason her hands were now sheathed in light blue fabric.

She realized everyone was staring at her. Her cheeks heated. She hastily removed the gloves and handed them to her mother, who was standing with her father to her right.

“Go on,” Agnarr urged quietly. “Take the scepter and orb.”

Elsa felt her heart pounding in her chest, though she wasn’t sure why. She reached down, carefully plucking the royal objects from the velvet pillow. Then she turned to face the crowd. She could feel the ice seeping from her fingers as it always did when she got nervous, and the scepter and orb soon became encased in silvery ice. The audience only oohed and aahed at the public display of magic, just as her mother had predicted. Elsa felt herself relax a bit.

“Your new queen, ladies and gentlemen, Elsa of Arendelle!” the bishop announced grandly.

Everyone cheered. Anna threw her arms around her sister, almost knocking the royal objects to the ground. “You did it,” she cried. “Good job. Now it’s party time!”

Before Elsa could reply, Anna broke from the hug, dancing down the aisle toward the back of the chapel, chatting with the various townspeople as she passed. Elsa watched her go a little wistfully; Anna was always so friendly with the people of Arendelle. In fact, she hardly spent any time in the castle at all, she was so active in town.

Her mind suddenly flashed back to her dream. Anna as queen. She could totally see it.

But no. She shook her head, looking down at the scepter still in her hands. She was queen now. And she’d do whatever it took to be a good one. Luckily, she had her family to help her. She couldn’t imagine doing this job alone.

She glanced over at her parents, who were gazing fondly into each other’s eyes. They looked so happy. Still so in love. Elsa suddenly felt glad she could take this burden off her father’s shoulders at last. He’d been ruling since he was a boy. It was time for some rest and relaxation.

“What are you going to do now, with all your free time?” she asked him.

“Oh! Are you kidding?” Agnarr laughed. “We have all sorts of adventures planned!”

“Speak for yourself,” her mother protested. “I’m looking forward to some lazy days just reading in the library.” She slipped her hand into Agnarr’s and gave him a knowing smile. He grinned back at her impishly.

Elsa giggled. “Okay, you two,” she teased. “Enough already! Let’s get you some chocolate.”

“Mmm. Chocolate,” they said in unison.

Elsa smiled. She turned to walk down the aisle. But as she took her first step, the hem of her dress caught on her heel. She started to teeter forward, losing her balance.

And suddenly everything went black.



“Any sign of her?”

Anna startled as Mattias placed a hand on her back. She turned to face him, her shoulders slumping. “Nothing,” she confessed. “You?”

“Not a sign.” He sighed deeply as he looked around the Enchanted Forest, which stretched out in all directions, seeming to mock them with its emptiness. They’d arrived an hour before and had been looking ever since, to no avail.

“I gotta admit,” the general mused, “it’s strange to be back here. I know it should feel like home—I spent thirty-four years here, after all. But to be honest, it still makes me uneasy.”

“It feels strange to me, too,” Anna agreed, frowning. “I usually love it here. But it feels... empty right now.”

“Well, the Northuldra are off with their reindeer. And it doesn’t seem like anyone else has been here for a while. No fresh trails...”

“Not even any sign of Samantha!” Olaf declared brightly, bouncing over to the two of them, with Kristoff and Sven close behind. “Which is probably for the best,” he added as an aside to the reindeer.

Anna shrugged. “Maybe Elsa went to Ahtohallan,” she mused.

“If she did, that’s a good thing, right?” Kristoff replied. “She’d be safe there.”

“Would she, though?” Anna asked worriedly. “I mean, Ahtohallan did almost kill her once. When she went too deep. What if that happened again?”

She closed her eyes, remembering that horrible day. She’d been trapped in a cave with no way to help her sister. She was beginning to feel that same frustration again.

“Anna!” Kristoff placed his hands on her shoulders. “Stop assuming the worst. Your sister is strong and powerful. A lot more powerful than she was back then. She can take care of herself.”

“Everyone says that, but it’s not always true!” Anna argued. She could feel tears welling in her eyes but refused to let them fall. “Sometimes my sister does need help. *My* help.”

“Well, what do you suggest we do?” Mattias asked. “Sven can’t exactly drive us across the Dark Sea.”

“I know.” Anna raked a frustrated hand through her hair. “And I don’t know.”

“Come on,” Kristoff urged. “Let’s go back to Arendelle. For all we know, she’s finally arrived and is looking for us.”

Anna sighed. She knew they were only trying to help, but they didn’t understand Elsa. Not like Anna did.

“I’ll hitch up Sven,” Kristoff added. “And when you’re ready, we’ll go, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, though she didn’t really want to. But, at the same time, she knew they’d never let her stay here by herself.

She wandered down the forest path, away from the group, her eyes roving over the thick forest with desperation. Where could Elsa be? Was she really in Ahtohallan? Was she safe?

Suddenly she felt an icy splash of water on her face. She looked up, shocked to see none other than the Water Nokk itself, standing tall in front of her and shaking its watery mane. The Water Spirit stomped its foot excitedly and pranced around Anna in a circle.

“What is it?” Anna asked curiously. “Do you know where Elsa is?”

The Water Nokk seemed to nod, then trotted away. When it got some distance out, it turned and looked at Anna expectantly, as if wanting her to follow. Anna glanced backward, to where her friends were waiting. If she went to tell them where she was going, she might lose the Water Nokk.

And any chance of finding her sister.

Making up her mind, she started walking down the path, following the Water Nokk. It took off again, galloping more quickly this time. Anna started to run, but she was only human and couldn’t keep up with a magical water horse at full speed.

“Slow down!” she begged.

But just as she thought she would lose the Water Nokk for good, she felt a gust of wind sweep in behind her, pulling her off her feet. A moment later, she was being flown through the forest on the trail of the Water Nokk.

“Thank you, Gale,” she said with relief. “Now take me to Elsa.”

She just hoped they wouldn't be too late.



“Glad I caught you!”

Elsa blinked, suddenly finding herself staring into the emerald-green eyes of a tall, lean man, dressed in the fashions of the Southern Isles. He was gripping her hand with long, delicate fingers and looked a little worried.

Feeling her face flush, she allowed him to pull her to her feet. Then she looked around the room, confused all over again. The last thing she remembered was tripping over the hem of her dress in the chapel. But now she was in the Great Hall, the Coronation Ball in full swing. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them again. What was going on with her today? Why was she losing time like this? It was almost like being in a dream of some sort. But obviously she was wide awake.

Right?

“Forgive me for being so forward, Your Majesty,” the man said, interrupting her troubled thoughts. “It’s just I didn’t want you to fall.”

He was handsome. She’d give him that. With thick auburn hair and sparkling green eyes. And his smile was endearing. But at the same time, something about him made her blood run cold, though she had no idea why.

“I appreciate that,” she murmured. “I just... don’t—”

“Like formal gatherings like this?” he finished for her. Then he smiled. “Me neither. I never know what one is supposed to do. Besides eat and dance, I suppose.” His gaze locked on her. “Do you dance, Your Majesty?”

“Not usually,” Elsa confessed. “But—”

“She’d love to!” Anna broke in, practically shoving Elsa in the man’s direction.

Elsa found herself caught in the man’s arms. She wanted to break away, but she knew it would be impolite. She was queen now—anything she did could spark an international incident. And so she forced a smile to her face and allowed him to sweep her onto the dance floor.

He was graceful, the perfect partner. Easily chatting about his homeland and his brothers—it sounded like he had quite a few. But Elsa couldn’t keep her mind on the conversation. There was just something about him that seemed... off. And her heart raced in her chest at every dip and turn.

When the song finally ended, she awkwardly excused herself, retreating to the dessert table and shoving a few pieces of chocolate in her mouth. A moment later, Anna was by her side again.

“What do you think of him? He’s nice, right? And gorgeous. Total marriage material, don’t you think?”

Elsa sighed. “I don’t know. I just met him two minutes ago.”

“Fun fact: You can actually marry a man you just met!” Anna assured her, refusing to be deterred. “I hear it’s done all the time. If it’s true love.”

Elsa watched as Anna gazed dreamily at one of the ice harvesters, who was currently refilling the punch bowl on the other side of the room. He had a shock of blond hair and was dressed in a rough leather vest. And... was that a reindeer with him? He’d brought a reindeer to her coronation party?

“Who is that?” she asked curiously. She was sure she’d never seen him before. And yet, he looked strangely familiar.

“My future husband,” Anna declared. “Of course, he doesn’t know it. Yet.”

The ice harvester burped loudly, causing several people to stop and stare. Elsa raised an eyebrow and Anna giggled. “So, he’s a bit of a fixer-upper,” she said with an impish shrug, then pranced over to Kristoff and his reindeer.

Elsa frowned. *Kristoff*. Wait, had Anna told her the guy’s name was Kristoff?

She caught her mother walking by and grabbed her arm. “How did Anna meet that guy?” she asked, pointing to the ice harvester.

Iduna glanced over at Anna, who was currently trying to impress Kristoff—if that really was his name—by standing on one foot and tapping her nose with her finger. Her mother rolled her eyes.

“Only Ahtohallan knows with that girl,” she replied with a laugh. She started to walk away.

Elsa grabbed her arm, her heart suddenly beating madly in her chest. She knew her mother had been making a joke. But that phrase. That word...

“Ahtohallan?” she whispered.

Her mother looked at her strangely. “You know. The river of memories?”

Elsa swallowed hard. Something niggled at the back of her brain.

River of memories...

Cave of memories...

The party seemed to slip away, a sudden vision taking over her senses. She saw herself in the cave, dressed in a shimmery white dress. She was making her way down a small, tight passage, stepping carefully so as not to slip on the ice. She was searching for something—she could tell. But what was it? The farther she went, the tighter the passage became. Until she could barely squeeze herself through.

“Stop,” Elsa told herself, suddenly frightened.

But she didn’t stop. She kept going, deeper.

And deeper...

“Sweetheart, are you all right?”

She jerked back to the present. Her mother was peering at her with worried eyes. She swallowed hard, trying to will the vision to fade.

The vision... or the memory?

Ahtohallan. The cave of memories.

What was it she had been searching for there?

And why couldn’t she remember?



“Ow!”

Anna grunted in pain as Gale dropped her unceremoniously onto the rocky beach at the edge of the Dark Sea. The Water Nokk was standing there, neighing loudly. Anna scrambled to her feet, looking out over the rough water, the waves churning angrily. It had grown dark on their journey, and she could barely see anything beyond the shore.

“She’s out there, isn’t she?” she asked the Water Nokk, her voice trembling.

The Water Spirit nickered, throwing back its watery head toward the sea. Gale swirled around her with anxious gusts. Bruni seemed to appear out of nowhere, climbing up the Water Nokk’s back and lighting up the night with a steady purple flame. It was obvious what they wanted her to do.

But could she? Could she cross the Dark Sea and survive?

She drew in a shaky breath. “Whatever it takes to help Elsa,” she told them. She stepped toward the water.

“Anna, no!”

She whirled around just in time to see Kristoff, on Sven's back, burst out of the forest, galloping in her direction. Her heart sank. Oh no. They must have followed her.

"What are you doing?" he cried, reaching her and sliding off the reindeer's back. "This has gone too far!"

"Not far enough, unfortunately," Anna said, staring out into the Dark Sea. She knew Ahtohallan was out there, somewhere. But all she could see was black rushing water.

"You can't go out there. You're not some magical spirit like your sister. It'll drown you like it drowned your parents."

"Maybe." Anna swallowed hard. "But what choice do I have?"

Kristoff bit his lower lip. The anguish on his face was hard to see.

"Please, Anna, I can't lose you," he whispered, taking her hands in his and squeezing them tight. An ache rose in her chest.

"Trust me, I don't want to be lost," she assured him with a tight laugh. She reached up, tracing his rough cheek with her fingers. "But Elsa is my sister. I can't lose her, either."

Kristoff nodded, bowing his head. "I know," he said. He dropped her hands, and Anna felt a terrifying emptiness at the loss of his touch. "And I would never try to stop you from doing what you feel you need to do. Just... promise me you'll be careful, okay?"

His words sent fresh tears to Anna's eyes. She loved him so much. And she was so grateful that he was willing to trust her in this—and would not try to dissuade her from what she had to do. She threw her arms around him, pulling him close. For a moment, they just held each other, as if they were the only two people in the world. Then Anna forced herself to step away.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she promised. She turned to the spirits, drawing in a breath. "Let's do this," she declared.

The Water Nokk, with Bruni perched on its head, charged into the water, leaping over the waves. Gale swept Anna up into its windy embrace and followed close behind. Anna gave one last look to the shore. At Kristoff standing forlornly on the sand. Emotions rolled over her like another wave. But she forced herself to turn back to the sea.

"Hang on, Elsa!" she cried. "I'm coming!"



“Elsa... I’m coming...”

Elsa startled awake at the sound of the voice. She looked around, at first unsure where she was again. Last she remembered she had been at her Coronation Ball. But now she seemed to be in her nightclothes, curled up on the couch in the castle library, her sister by her side. Across from her, her mother sat sleepily in a cushioned chair, and her father appeared in the doorway, carrying a plate of leftover kransekake.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted,” he declared, setting the cake down on the table in front of the couch. “Who’s up for closing the gates for the next thirteen years so we can get some rest?”

“Don’t even joke about that!” Anna protested, reaching over to grab some cake. She grinned at her father. “Besides, you’re not king anymore. You don’t get to make the rules.” She turned to Elsa. “Which reminds me, Your Majesty, what will be your first act as queen?” Her green eyes twinkled. “Will it be putting an ice-skating rink in the town square?”

Elsa opened her mouth to answer but was cut off by the voice again.

“ELSSSA! Where are you?”

She frowned. “Did you hear that?” she asked. It was soft, muted, sounding far away. But also familiar at the same time. In fact, if she hadn’t known any better, she’d have said it sounded like Anna herself. But Anna was right here, shoving a slice of cake in her mouth.

“Hear what?” her sister asked, licking her sugary fingers. “Hey, anyone up for charades?”

“Elsssssa. Can you hear me?”

Elsa rubbed her head with her hand. Her mother frowned. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“You don’t hear it?” Elsa asked. “None of you do?”

“Hear what, honey?” her father queried.

Suddenly the pungent scent of the sea rose to Elsa’s nose again, as it had earlier that day when she was hugging her mother. She wrinkled her brow, feeling goose bumps appear on her arm. She felt cold. The kind of cold you feel when you’re soaking wet.

“Elsa, please! Listen to me!”

The voice was louder now, more desperate. Elsa could hear the fear in the words. She rose to her feet. “Maybe I’m just tired...” she started to say, then trailed off as her gaze fell on her sister.

“Anna!” she cried. “Your hair!”

“I know, it’s probably a mess. But whatever. You’ve seen worse,” Anna joked. “At least there’s no drool in it, like when I first wake up.”

“But it’s...” Elsa bit her lower lip. She was going to say *white*. Her sister’s hair had turned completely white. But had it, really? Or were her eyes playing tricks on her again, as they had earlier?

Her heart beat fast in her chest. The smell of seaweed was growing more intense by the minute, and she fought the urge to block her nose. She glanced at her parents and sister, who were laughing and joking with one another as if nothing was wrong. But something *was* wrong. Their skin was growing paler. Her mother’s hair, which she was positive had been dry a moment before, now looked soaking wet.

I dreamed you died in a shipwreck...

Elsa’s knees wobbled, threatening to collapse out from her under her. “What’s going on?” she murmured.

Anna rushed to her side, grabbing her before she collapsed. “Why don’t you go to bed?” she suggested worriedly. “You have a big day tomorrow. You need your rest.”

Elsa squinted at her in horror. Spiderwebs of ice seemed to be crawling down her sister’s face. “What’s tomorrow?” she managed to ask in a hoarse voice.

Anna grinned. The ice crackled on her cheek. “It’s coronation day, obviously.”

“But... today was coronation day.”

“And so is tomorrow,” Anna explained. “And the next day.” She shrugged. “It’s *always* coronation day here.”

“ELSA! Please! I think you’re in trouble!”

In trouble.

Elsa struggled to free herself from her sister’s grasp. Or the girl who looked like her sister, anyway. But this wasn’t Anna.

The real Anna was older.

The real Anna was... queen. Like in her dream.

Had it been a dream at all?

Or was *this* the dream? Everything around her. Right here. Right now.

“Elsa, please! Listen to my voice.”

Her mind flashed back to the cave again. She was deep now. Deeper than she’d ever gone before. She’d been reaching for something. Just out of her grasp. And then...

“No,” Elsa whispered. “Oh no.”

Suddenly it all came rushing back to her. Her trip to Ahtohallan. Her desire to find a special memory to share with Arendelle at her parents’ memorial. She’d searched through so many memories, but none had seemed good enough for such an important occasion. So she’d gone deeper. And deeper...

...and found something else instead.

Not a memory... but a dream.

A perfect dream of a perfect day, dreamed, once upon a time, by a sad little princess trapped in her bedroom. A princess who desperately wanted a better life. A life where she hadn’t almost killed her sister. A life where no one feared her magic. A life where she could be accepted for who she was. A life filled with laughter and love and always feeling safe.

Dreams can become memories, too, she realized. If you held them close to your heart.

She forced herself to look back at her parents and her sister now. Iduna and Agnarr, cuddling together on the chair, feeding each other cake. Anna dancing over to the bookcase to get the fishbowl they used to play charades. She caught Elsa watching her and waved.

“Did you want to go first?” she asked with an easy grin.

Elsa found herself unable to speak. Her thoughts were whirling through her head too hard and fast to catalog. *I could stay here*, she thought wildly. *In this perfect dream. I could stay here forever.*

For a moment it actually seemed like a good idea. The *best* idea, really. To have everything she ever wanted and so much more. To have her family back. Her father. Her mother. Her sister.

Her sister...

The voice came again. Desperate. Pleading.

“ELSSSSSA, CAN YOU HEAR ME? I NEED YOU.”

“Anna...” she whispered.

“That’s my name! Don’t wear it out!” joked the auburn-haired girl in front of her. *Anna*. But, at the same time, not Anna.

“I’m sorry, but I have to go,” Elsa found herself saying.

Her family looked up at her in surprise. “Do you?” Iduna asked worriedly, her blue eyes locking on her daughter. “Do you really?” She sounded sad. So sad. And for a moment, Elsa felt as if her heart would shatter into a million pieces if her mother spoke another word.

But then she heard her sister again. Her *real* sister.

She swallowed hard, taking one last look at her mother. Her father. “Yes,” she said, nodding her head. “I’m sorry, but I do.” She paused, then added, “But thank you. Thank you for giving me this day. I... won’t forget it. Ever.”

Suddenly she didn’t know if she was talking to her parents anymore—or to Ahtohallan itself. Maybe it was all one and the same. She’d wanted a special memory. And she’d been given one. But now it was time to say—

“Goodbye,” she murmured.

Her vision blurred. The world seemed to shift before her eyes. Her family, once warm and alive, began to crystallize, freezing into place. A moment later, they were nothing more than ice sculptures, crafted by a master hand. And Elsa found herself alone, no longer in a familiar firelit library but in the middle of an icy cave.

An icy cave of memories... and dreams.

A tear slipped down her cheek. For a moment she just stood there, as if she, too, had frozen in place. A wave of exhaustion weighed her down, and a frosty coldness crawled up her spine.

But then she heard the voice again. “Elsa! Please help me!”

And she began to run.

“I’m coming, Anna!” she called. “Hang on.”



“Elsa!”

Anna croaked her sister’s name, her mouth filled with seawater. The salt was making her throat burn and yelling was making her voice hoarse. Still, she kept at it, best she could, as she and Gale worked to follow the Water Nokk across the Dark Sea.

Her eyes scanned the horizon for some sign of land—some hint of the mythical glacier Ahtohallan. But everything remained dark. And she was beginning to despair. What if she couldn’t get to Ahtohallan herself? What if it only revealed itself to her sister?

What if she was doomed to meet the same fate as their parents?

“Elsa!”

A huge wave rose in front of them. Gale tried to lift her over it but misjudged its height, and the wave crashed over Anna’s head instead,

soaking her to the bone. The water was freezing. Her whole body was racked with shivers.

“Please,” Anna begged, croaking out the words. “We need to stop for a second.”

But there was no place to stop. The Water Nokk and Bruni were far ahead now—only visible by a small purple dot on the horizon. And Gale was clearly getting tired, fighting the waves. What was Anna going to do if the Wind Spirit dropped her into the water? There was no way she could last even a second in the rough sea.

And Elsa... what would happen to Elsa if she failed to reach in her time?

And so she did the only thing she could. She kept struggling to stay above water, calling her sister’s name. Not only with her voice, but with everything she had inside of her. Her soul. Her heart. Pushing all her love for Elsa out into the unknown, praying it would be enough.

“Elsa!” she pleaded. “I need you!”



“Elssssa. I neeeded you...”

Elsa collapsed onto the icy ground just outside of the mouth of Ahtohallan, heaving in huge breaths. She raised her head, looking out into the Dark Sea, her eyes bleary and her body aching. But her exhaustion was mixed with relief. She was back in the real world again.

“Elsa...”

Her head snapped to attention at the sound of the voice. “Anna!” she cried. “Where are you?”

She heard a nicker and looked up. The Water Nokk had appeared out of nowhere—Bruni perched on its head—and was now standing on the shore, as if waiting for her.

Elsa’s heart fluttered in her chest. “Is Anna all right?” she asked.

Not waiting for an answer, she scrambled to her feet, throwing herself onto the spirit’s back. The water horse took off running, galloping straight into the Dark Sea. Elsa held on to its neck as tightly as she could, her mind racing with worry.

“Anna!” she cried out. “Where are you?”

Suddenly she caught a glimpse of a dark shape, struggling in the sea. Heart in her throat, she urged the Water Nokk forward. As they drew closer, she realized Gale was trying to keep an unconscious Anna afloat, but the Wind Spirit was faltering. Horrified, Elsa reached down, grabbing Anna's icy hand in her own, yanking her up onto the Water Nokk's back.

"Get us to shore," she commanded the spirit.

The Water Nokk obeyed, setting off across the sea. Elsa cradled Anna in her arms, tears streaming down her cheeks. "What were you thinking?" she demanded. "Why would you do this?"

But in her heart, she knew exactly why Anna would do this.

And without her, Elsa would have never broken free of her dream.

Eventually they reached the shore. There Elsa found a desperate Kristoff, standing on the beach. When he saw them, he ran over and helped Elsa get Anna off the horse.

"Oh no!" he cried. "She's... not...?"

"She's alive," Elsa assured him. "But I think she's swallowed a lot of water."

Kristoff dropped to his knees, putting his mouth over Anna's, giving her his breath. As he worked, Elsa paced the beach, feeling helpless. Despite all her magic, she could not help her sister.

Please be okay, she begged. Please...

Suddenly Anna coughed violently. Kristoff turned her over, just in time for her to spit out what seemed to be half of the sea. Elsa ran to her sister, her heart racing in her chest.

"Elsa!" Anna cried, looking up at her, her eyes growing wide. "You're okay."

"Yes!" Elsa choked on the word. "Thanks to you, I am."

Anna's mouth quirked in a small, weak smile. She turned to Kristoff. "See? Sometimes she *does* need me."

Kristoff rolled his eyes, but Elsa could see the sheer relief on his face. "Yeah, yeah," he said. He kissed Anna on the top of her head, then hugged her close before rising to his feet. He turned to Elsa.

"I'm going to get the wagon and the others. There are blankets—they'll help her keep warm. At least until we get her back to Arendelle."

"Thank you, Kristoff," Elsa said gratefully.

Once he had left, she turned back to her sister, thankful to see the color was returning to her cheeks. She was going to be all right.

Anna sat up and rubbed her eyes. “I knew something had to be wrong when you didn’t show up for the memorial party,” she said. “What happened?”

Elsa grimaced, then told the story. Anna listened carefully to every word. When she had finished, her sister sighed. “It actually sounds kind of amazing,” Anna admitted. “The day, I mean. I’m honestly surprised you didn’t want to stay.”

“Once upon a time, I might have,” Elsa confessed. “Back then, all I had were dreams like this. But now? I have so much more.”

Anna nodded. “Right. Like the Enchanted Forest, the spirits—”

“And, most importantly, I have *you*,” Elsa said, smiling down at her sister. “The real-life you. At the end of the day, that’s all I really need.”

“I love you, Elsa,” Anna said, throwing her arms around her sister.

“I love you, too,” Elsa said, squeezing her back. Then she sighed.

“What is it?” Anna asked, looking up at her.

Elsa shrugged. “I’m just disappointed that I won’t have anything special to share for our parents’ memorial.”

“Oh, please,” Anna scoffed. “Don’t you understand? Just you being there is special. Because *you* are special. To me. And to all of Arendelle.” She reached out and placed a hand over her sister’s. Somehow it felt warm already. “Memories are great and all, Elsa. But us being together—in the here and now—well, I can’t think of anything better than that.”

“Me neither,” Elsa agreed with a smile. “You make every day feel like coronation day.”

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